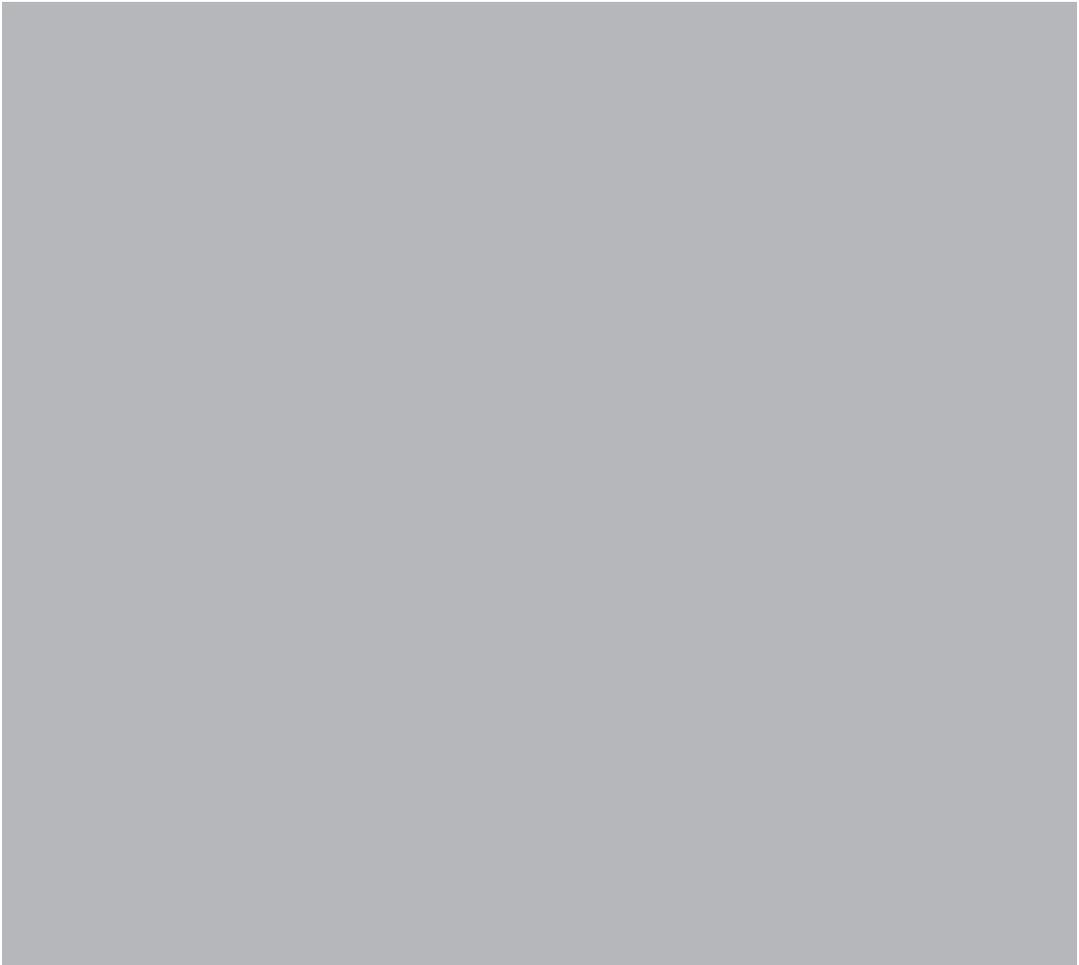


Existential Analysis

25.1

Journal of The Society for Existential Analysis

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF EXISTENTIAL ANALYSIS



Existential Analysis

The Journal of **The Society for Existential Analysis** 2014

Published by:

The Society for Existential Analysis, BM Existential, London, WC1N 3XX

Tel: 07000 394 783 · www.existentialanalysis.org.uk

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The Journal provides a forum for the analysis of existence from philosophical and psychological perspectives. It is published biannually. Contributions are invited in areas of philosophical and psychological theory, case studies, discussion papers, book reviews and letters. **The opinions expressed by authors of the papers and reviews published are those of the authors themselves, and not necessarily those of the editors, the editorial board, or members of The Society for Existential Analysis.**

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Journal of **The Society for Existential Analysis**

Edited by:

Simon du Plock

Greg Madison

January 2014



The Society for Existential Analysis

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EDITORIAL

Existential Analysis is celebrating 25 years of publication. Our silver anniversary edition opens with a brief commemoration by Emmy van Deurzen, followed by *Becoming an Existential Therapist*, the transcript of her contribution to the BBC radio 3 series 'Existential Me'.

The issue continues with the second part of Ernesto Spinelli's paper on *Being Sexual*, and it is followed by Victor Rodrigues' response to Spinelli's part one, *Are Sexual Preferences Existential Choices?* (part one appeared in the July 2013 edition of this journal). We would like to invite further contributions to this discussion on existential understandings of sexuality and will endeavour to publish them in the 26th edition (25.2 will include a number of papers from the recent Society of Existential Analysis conference, which focused on the themes of Love and Hate).

We also feature a number of papers on questions of 'mental illness' and issues related to psychopathology. The first of these, by Diego Vitali, describes an attempt to work phenomenologically in a psychiatric institution. Next we offer Richard's critique of Szasz's seminal text *The Myth of Mental Illness*. We are honoured to be able to publish Aaron Esterson's paper *The Affirmation of Experience*, written in 1985 but never presented or published until now, and acknowledge our indebtedness to Anthony Stadlen for preparing this paper and for his brief commentary, *Quintessential Phenomenology*, which explains the circumstances surrounding the paper's fate. The issue concludes with the theme of psychopathology taken up again by Ekaterina Denyskova in *Madness as an Escape*, and Shield's *Psychosis as a Mechanism for Coping with Existential Distress*.

We are also pleased to publish three diverse papers, *Creative Inspiration and Existential Coaching* by Sasha van Deurzen-Smith, *George Berguno's A Phenomenological Analysis of Existential Conscience* in James Ivory's *The Remains of the Day*, and *Kierkegaardian Selves* by Tamar Aylat-Yaguri, all thought-provoking contributions to stimulate and inspire. Responses are always encouraged.

As usual we include a number of enlightening book reviews; our thanks to Martin Adams who can be contacted if you are interested in reviewing any titles on the current book list.

Simon du Plock
Greg Madison

COMMEMORATING 25 YEARS OF *EXISTENTIAL ANALYSIS*

It is the 25th anniversary of the publication of the Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis this year and this is an occasion well worth celebrating. Existential Analysis is a Journal of note in its specialist field and is known worldwide by those interested in reflecting on existential reality, especially but not exclusively so in relation to practicing the professions of psychotherapy and counselling. A quarter of a century of quality papers on philosophical therapy is something to be grateful for and not take for granted.

Twenty-five years ago it wasn't obvious that existential therapy would ever be considered a valid form of therapy. The creation of the Society for Existential Analysis as a platform for existential therapists has made a huge difference to the situation and to the credibility of our field. But SEA would not have had the gravitas it has without being supported by a good journal which demonstrates the thoughtfulness that goes into training and practicing as an existential therapist and thinking carefully about human existence.

When we created the SEA in 1988 we were aware of the importance of supporting it with a journal. I am grateful to the first two editors of that first journal: Carole Van Artsdalen and Elena Lea Zanger, who produced that all important first volume in 1990 that carried the papers of our very first, 1988 conference. It might be nice to bring out that first journal in a new edition at some point as it was in some ways the defining statement on what the SEA was about and has long been out of print.

But of course what has really made the Journal what it is today is a long and sustained sequence of twice yearly publications with papers of interest and sometimes full of controversy. The second team of editors (in 1991) were Ernesto Spinelli and Alessandra Lemma, followed in 1993 by Simon du Plock (who had contributed a paper to the previous volume) with Hans Cohn, followed in July 2000 by Simon du Plock and John Heaton, succeeded in July 2007 by Simon du Plock and Greg Madison. There have also been two very popular volumes of selected papers: *Existential Challenges to Psychotherapeutic Theory and Practice*, (edited by Simon du Plock and Hans Cohn) appeared in 1995; *Further Existential Challenges to*

Psychotherapeutic Theory and Practice, (edited by Simon du Plock) was published in 2002.

Which brings me to a very necessary and long overdue expression of gratitude to all those who have been instrumental in making this Journal so good. But as will be evident, in particular to Simon du Plock who has laboured for many years now to keep the quality of the Journal improving and keep it regular, alive and vital. There are many people who make a Society what it is, but editors of journals are rarely seen and appreciated for the constant efforts they put in. Simon has edited no fewer than 22 Volumes of the Journal and on our 25th anniversary I would like to express my thanks to him in particular for a job extremely well done.

May the Journal continue to flourish for the next quarter of a century to come and may it keep alive our interest in exploring existence with all the passion and clarity we can muster.

Emmy van Deurzen,

London, January 2014

Becoming An Existential Therapist

Emmy van Deurzen

Abstract

Original version of an essay written for the programme ‘Existential Me’, The Essay – BBC Radio 3 – short version read for BBC 3 on 15 November 2013 and published in the *Hermeneutic Circular*.

Early decisions about religion

I can trace the moment when I decided to commit myself to the search for truth. I was seven years old and had just realized that other children in my class were generally baptized and thus somehow branded and defined by belonging to a particular creed or church. As this took place in the Netherlands in the 1950s, my friends were mostly Protestant, Calvinist, Lutheran or Reformed. Some were Catholic or Jewish and in one or two cases Hindu. With so many options on offer, I was dismayed that I had been left out of this distribution of riches. To be so depleted did seem to convey one slight advantage on me in that I was exempt from having to go to a place of worship on the weekend. Most of my friends and cousins seemed to find this rather tedious and annoying. Yet I was acutely aware that the lack of religious affiliation was also a social handicap, as it created an aura of difference and suspicion around me. I was not ‘one of the chosen’ as others seemed to assume they were. Several times friends or their parents warned me that I would be barred from salvation and would not go to heaven after my death. This troubled me deeply although I had no image of hell or heaven and refused to believe them. It made it very important to understand all this better and I set out on a life long journey to establish the truth of the matter and became fascinated with metaphysics.

My parents were free thinkers, who had abandoned their childhood Christian beliefs after their trials and tribulations in the Second World War, in which they had come to question everything they had been taught. They had joined the Theosophical Society, an organization that aimed to distil core truths from all the great world religions, making sense of spirituality in a more pluralistic way. In practice it meant that my parents exposed me to Hindu and Buddhist ideas as much as to Judeo-Christian ones, though I cannot remember being told much about Moslem concepts till later on. When my primary school teacher asked everyone in our class to state their religion, I really was not sure what to reply and hesitantly said that I had no religion. My teacher was not pleased and sent me home to ask my parents what the correct answer was. My dad laughed and scoffed. He

suggested that I tell my teacher that I was a heathen. This scandalized my mother, who thought I should call myself an atheist or an agnostic. When I was beginning to get my seven-year-old head around these terms, I found them troublesome and deeply wanting, for I did not want to be defined by what I was not. I wanted to engage with something.

I already had deep and secret beliefs of my own and wanted to commit my entire soul to something that was true and good and worthwhile rather than stating that I was an unbeliever or a doubter. I loved nature and freedom and fairness and kindness, the sunshine on the North Sea waves, the wind sweeping me along or challenging me on my bike through the dunes. And I loved going camping with my parents, for four weeks each summer, trekking through Europe with little tents, meeting people from different countries, learning languages, realizing how many different sorts of existence there were for each person to choose from. I relished rain when it made the tent seem cosy or made the forest or mountain streams come to life. I loved watching clouds drifting through the sky and I was mesmerized by thunderstorms and sunsets. At night, sitting in the dark by our tents, the stars and planets overawed me. I was eager to know more about the universe and wanted to understand what it was all about.

Impact of my parents' war experiences

Most of the time I lived in a confined situation however, in our tiny second floor flat in the North Sea dunes at the South West of The Hague. We looked out towards the sea on one side and on all other sides to rows of new-built flats and post-war construction sites. My elder sister and I shared a box room so compact that one of our beds had to be stored under the other during the daytime. We were initially uncomplaining, as we were never left in any doubt that we were lucky to have this modest space at all. Never mind that our cousins were better off. We were on the move and with hard work life would improve.

The stories we were told by our parents on a daily basis were harrowing. We knew that The Hague had been occupied by the Nazis for five years and had been bombed continuously. The population had suffered greatly from hunger, persecution and fear, especially for that last dire, ice-cold winter of 44-45, known as the Dutch Famine. My father had been in hiding regularly, balancing on the rafters above a freezing loft, in danger of his life for many months. He had contracted double pneumonia and continued to suffer from severe asthma as a result. I heard him struggle for breath many a time in the night and was profoundly aware of the fragility of life. I knew that if Holland had not been liberated, I would not have been born. My mother had nursed sick children, who suffered from starvation, diphtheria, tetanus and tuberculosis, during the war, as a nurse in the children's hospital. Our maternal grandparents had lost their home and all their possessions

twice over, first when their house was bombed to the ground in The Hague by the invaders and a second time when their new accommodation in Arnhem was bombed by the allies towards the end of the war. Many of my uncles and great uncles had been deported to Nazi labour camps or in some cases had been summarily shot in the street whilst resisting. During the German blockade of food and fuel to the West of Holland, all of my family suffered and came to the edge of the tolerable, living on 700 calorie diets, eating thin soups made from flower bulbs, having no access to food or fuel. My parents were so traumatised by it all that they talked to us about it non-stop during our early years. I have no doubt that this created second-generation traumatisation and that many of my choices in later life were rooted in this sensitization. Our parents deliberately exposed us to different nations and languages so that we would become a force for the good in terms of fraternization in Europe. I grew up with an acute sense of scarcity and learnt to count my blessings from very early on. I felt responsible for making the world a better and more peaceful place if at all possible. Though I was born some years after the end of the war I can vividly remember the coupons my mum still used to buy sugar and butter. We lived with very little. What excitement when my mother was able to buy her first little fridge for that diminutive kitchen! We experienced a huge sense of luxury when a washing machine came along some years later and she no longer had to stand bending over a tub, hand washing our sheets and our smalls.

In that cramped and uptight environment we sometimes heard the nightly screams of a downstairs' neighbour who suffered from recurrent nightmares after having been tortured in a Japanese war camp. We heard gruesome stories from other children about their fathers' suffering and of their experiences of torture. For a while I lived in fear of the prospect of a third world war, where I might have to endure the water dripping on my own head, or the matchsticks inserted under my nails. I was worried. Our next-door neighbour had lost one of her arms in a bombing. We saw the tattoos on the forearms of those who had returned from concentration camps. My imagination ran wild and I used to picture myself living in such circumstances as I read books like Anne Frank's diary when I was still a small child and I played out concentration camp scenes in my mind most nights, which unsurprisingly led to me having recurrent nightmares. I used to wake up in terror, convinced I was in a camp and was about to be led into a torture chamber. No wonder we panicked during the Suez crisis when Dutch safety was once again severely threatened and we were made to practise running for cover to cellars and bomb-shelters, in case we were going to be under nuclear attack.

Search for knowledge

Reality was far too scary for me to be casual about my beliefs. I was searching for something that could make sense of it all, but did not have the luxurious assurance of creed or God. But while I grew up with an acute sense of danger I also felt a deep sense of gratitude for every moment of relative safety. Such moments were provided by love, friendship and play. They were also provided by exploration, both physically and intellectually. In that post war atmosphere of struggle, building dens in the dunes was a favourite occupation. But it was surpassed by the exquisite pleasure of reading books, which was an exhilarating (and often secretive) activity that opened up new and more promising worlds and ways of living. Every week I rode my bike to the library and returned with a bag full of new loot in the basket on my handlebars. My tastes were wide-ranging, from Enid Blyton and Erich Kästner to books about astronomy, psychology, philosophy or history. But soon I discovered adult novels. As my father had spent six months in Paris when I was a little girl and we went camping all around France early on, I was attracted to French literature. Reading Camus, Sartre and de Beauvoir was intoxicating and a little bit scary. Their books spoke of choices that had to be made, freedoms that had to be fought for, living that had to be learnt and loves that could be earned. I wanted all that and wanted it badly, but I was afraid of the price, which as they showed, would have to be paid. I found Anouilh's plays about Antigone and Joan of Arc and Brecht's plays about Mother Courage and the Good Person of Szechwan especially poignant as they provided me with much needed female role models. It was only many years later that I realized that all these female characters were all too prepared to be self-sacrificing.

The way the existentialists questioned the bourgeois principles that my family had lost in the war gave me hope: perhaps it was an advantage to be so deprived. The existential rebellion against the dogma of religion gave me an intellectual home. These ideas all at once saved me, electrified me and called me to account. What was I going to do to make sure I would not go under in a world of easy options or hypocrisies? We were now moving towards the rewards of the early Sixties and I was wary and aware of the dangers of going under in make believe and the indulgence of sweeping romanticism. I found it all too easy to swoon into the seductive and deeply felt sentiments of pop and blues music, especially when I began to sing with the guitar myself. I yearned for a life of new discoveries, wider horizons and great love. How would I live my life? I had the urgent idea that it was important to make the most of the new opportunities and wanted to help create a better world rather than expecting it to be offered to me as a gift.

In secondary school, where I studied classics, I briefly but enthusiastically adopted the pantheism of the Greeks and Romans and read about their rituals and myths with the same eagerness I had felt in reading folk tales.

I had a liking for the Stoics too and plastered Seneca, Cicero and Marcus Aurelius' quotes all over my school diary. But I was ready for more serious fare and became fascinated with Plato, falling in love with Socrates' dialoguing spirit and his fierce enquiry into truth combined with his firm challenges to sophists, who only pretended to know. He gave me a method for my later work as a therapist as well: the Socratic dialogue in which two people collaborate in order to establish what is right and what is wrong. I felt it was a better way towards wisdom than science and led to greater existential clarity.

After my discovery of Plato I could never just fall in blindly with existentialism again. I would always come to it critically, challenging it from the perspective of my own experiential reality and from the method of enquiry that Socrates had shown me. Later on, as I studied logic and epistemology, I became committed to checking any assertions against scientific facts and rational thought. At the same time in my adolescence the passionate nature of existentialism dovetailed beautifully with my own life preoccupations and with the desire to live a freer kind of life than my parents had lived. When Sartre showed that hell was other people this made good sense to me in the claustrophobic atmosphere of our tiny flat, where tempers flared and I felt oppressed and thwarted and craved privacy and respect. De Beauvoir's questioning of female assumptions was also formative and inspiring, as I knew that I would never want to be a housewife in the way my mother was. I wanted equality and dignity and saw no reason why being a girl should have any relevance to my future. I was ready to liberate myself from my narrow confines to find the existential freedom these authors promised.

Personal awakening

Then, in 1967 on one of our long summer treks, this time in a still pristine pre-tourist Portugal, I fell head over heels in love with a Frenchman five years older than myself. I was fifteen and he was twenty. He was a student, a poet, a sea sailor and an existential rebel. The vehemence of his feelings for me overwhelmed me. Our subsequent daily correspondence utterly transformed me and opened an entirely new vista in my life. His visits to the Netherlands where I was still a schoolgirl drew me into a world I had thus far only dreamt about. And then in May '68 came the French events that sparked a revolution and general strike, leading to the total stoppage of postal services for several months. My heart ground to the occasional halt but grew ever fonder, as I lived on the Parisian barricades in spirit. My emotions were strong and my commitment was entire and total. The relief and exhilaration of seeing my boyfriend that summer were ecstatic and our political discussions and intimacy led to me becoming grown up. During the next year I found it hard to concentrate on my schoolwork and Latin and Greek seemed torrid and boring by comparison to the transcendent love and longing I was swept up in. My difficulties were eased a little by

the fact that my French grades kept improving as letters continued to fly back and forth between The Hague and Brittany. I was living the poetry, the love and the promise of a better future. But a year later, after a couple more heady visits, sailing on the Dutch lakes, walking on the North Sea beach, spending the night watching the defining, giant step for mankind of the Apollo 11 mission, he abruptly and silently disappeared from my life, without a word or explanation, leaving me with an enormous inner vacuum, that I was unable to fill for a long time. I became desolate and suicidal and only barely managed to survive because of the kindness of friends, family and teachers and the rediscovery of my own creativity. It taught me much about the importance of human connection and the crucial role occupied in this by our personal capacity to reach out and contribute something to the world. I discovered writing, self-reliance, courage and resourcefulness, not despite the existential pain I was feeling, but because of it. I found out that I was able to face whatever life threw at me and decided to expect catastrophe and loneliness as predictable and standard. I was determined to help create a world in which people would be more able to communicate, be more genuine and love each other. I wrote songs and sang about it. I was deeply concerned about wars and human destructiveness.

As soon as my final exams were over, I was off to France, a free spirit ready to live the life I had longed for but no longer burdened with romantic illusions and determined to remain alone for the rest of my life. Feminism was now important to me, but I felt it failed to see the other side. I went to see my ex boyfriend and tried to understand his position, which was that he had to live his life before he could commit to me. I had peace with this and gave up on him. Though I was very lonely my first year in Montpellier, I was in the best of company, discovering a literature so rich that it soothed my soul. Alongside the existential authors came Flaubert and Proust and Rousseau and Hugo and Bernanos, Gide, Bazin and many others. But I was also immersed in Freud and Jung and Hesse and the poetry of Verlaine, Valery, Eluard and Rimbaud. Music, as always made its own crucial contribution to my search for expansion and my groping towards redemption. I discovered the melancholy joy of French chansons and revelled in Aznavour, Brel, Brassens and Ferrat, alongside my growing passion for Baroque music. As soon as my philosophy studies took off in seriousness I found that the giant abyss inside of me could easily accommodate the entire range of European philosophers. I was eager for every drop of distilled wisdom. I delighted in their yearning for understanding and their search for any meaning that could be had. I resonated deeply with each sentence I read.

From phenomenology to existential therapy

I was fortunate enough to study for my masters in philosophy with Michel Henry, an existential-phenomenologist who knew Husserl and Heidegger,

Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Marx and Engels, but also Kant and Hegel and Nietzsche better than most and whose search for human decency beyond academic philosophy was comforting and enlightening. He taught me phenomenology and forced me to read Husserl in German before tackling Heidegger. I struggled with it as much as I had struggled with Hegel. But I felt inspired by his view that phenomenology was a ground breaking method that was worth mastering. I stuck with it, reading his own book: *The Essence of Manifestation* (Henry, 1969) with growing understanding. Henry was inspirational in the way in which he drew wisdom from controversy, remaining aloof from academic rivalries. He gave me sanctuary in the philosophy department and with it the confidence to pursue my therapeutic practice as a form of applied philosophy. He exposed me to a rich tradition of existential philosophers, such as Buber, Scheler, Tillich, Jaspers, Levinas and Marcel, who he thought could show me the way when formulating a phenomenological theory of human relationships to replace the then so dominant Freudian and Lacanian frameworks. I then discovered Binswanger and shortly afterwards R.D. Laing and realized I had found a field to which I would be able to contribute, as it badly needed further development.

For me, the defining characteristic of existential therapy was that it was philosophy in practice. The most liberating aspect of existential therapy was that I did not have to accept a restrictive picture of the human psyche or personality. There was no need to accept essentialist or determinist pictures of human nature. Phenomenology allowed for a free and open exploration, without a blue print of morality or a dogmatic theory of human reality. This made it possible to think about the human struggle as being defined by circumstances and context. It made it more important to define the way people could or wanted to live and understand the obstacles and difficulties they encountered. There was no need to restrict one's thinking in terms of pathology or actuality: it became important to think in terms of possibility. Since human beings evolve and change as they become more conscious and alter their position in the world, the objective of existential therapy is to awaken a person to consciousness and awareness of their own position in the world. Their situation is crucial to the way they perceive the world. We are moulded by the culture, history and circumstances we find ourselves embedded in. People create their lives out of what has been given to them and what they have managed to understand of life. Human life is a relatively brief experience, which starts with conception and ends in death, leaving each of us to make something meaningful out of what happens in between. The golden rule of phenomenology is to describe rather than to interpret and this allows us to approach the mystery of human consciousness in a careful and respectful manner, noticing that life is rather different according to our different cultures, situations and circumstances

though we have some fundamental experiences in common and we are all capable of transcending our early givens to some extent.

Practising what you preach

Into the mix of philosophy and psychology, came psychiatry. I became involved in psychiatry through my relationship with a French medical student while I was a philosophy student in Montpellier in the early 1970s. He decided to specialize in psychiatry as I decided to move on to psychotherapy so that our disparate interests could come together. My study of the works of psychoanalytic authors like Freud, Jung, Lacan, Deleuze and Irigaray was absorbing and intriguing and affected me deeply, but it did not satisfy my search for a philosophical way to practice. As I joined my now psychiatrist husband in his internships in various psychiatric settings, first with autistic children, then with young anorexic women, I was shocked at the lack of care given. I found that many people as soon as they became patients lost their own voice and self-respect, giving up their agency, autonomy and humanity as they became dependent on medical care and chemicals. I was now being confronted with the depth of despair in people so alienated from themselves and society that they were often unreachable. In spite of this it was obvious to me that their struggles and suffering were not so dissimilar to my own, though they had fallen more deeply into desolation and isolation than I ever had or ever intended to. I was able to resonate with them strongly enough to sense what they were confused by and what they were after. For they too had lost their gods, their identity and their sense of belonging or potential for redemption. I had found a field of work in which I was at home and where my capacity for clear thinking and my desire for truth and understanding were really wanted and needed. I knew immediately that what was required now was for me to sharpen and educate my sensitivity further rather than to keep trying to blunt or silence it. I found in existential philosophy an endless source of inspiration and a wealth of ideas from which to draw when helping other people to make sense of their troubles and create new meanings in life.

It became essential to seek out places where working with people could be done in an experimental and more humane way than was possible in the psychiatric hospital of Font d'Aurelle in Montpellier. My now husband and I chose to go work and live in a revolutionary psychiatric hospital in the Massif Central, in the small town of Saint Alban, Lozère, which was the birthplace of French social and community therapy. Here I was able to apply my philosophical understanding to my work with individual patients and groups and was for ever changed by this baptism of fire, in which I was stretched and constantly put to the test. I summarized my learning in my master's dissertation with Michel Henry on the phenomenology of solipsism, loneliness and schizophrenia. This also sparked his interest in

psychotherapy and psychoanalysis on which he was to write himself some years later. For my part I decided to get further training and so I went back to University to qualify as a clinical psychologist, doing research on attempted suicide. I wanted to develop a method for helping people understand their shipwrecked lives better and realized that the time had come to begin to develop my own existential way of working.

During my training in Lacanian psychoanalytic therapy I disagreed with so much of that particular interpretation of reality that I searched high and low for alternative models and methods and came to appreciate the work of R.D. Laing and other radical psychiatrists who had been inspired by the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. In the UK in the Sixties and Seventies these so called 'anti-psychiatrists' created therapeutic communities for people who were struggling with survival but who did not want to be consigned to mental hospitals or pumped full of medication.

I came to the UK in 1977 to work with this movement and lived and worked in one of these communities, immersing myself in people's problems and experimenting with alternative ways of approaching mental illness. While the communities were often lacking in structure and good support, the idea was ground breaking and remains of value today. This way of working was not unlike what I had experienced in Saint Alban, except that my relationships with the people I lived with were much closer and led to life-long friendships. By now I could no longer take the method of psychopathological diagnosis seriously. What people needed was to be understood, not to be medicated. They wanted to solve their problems, not suppress them. Their condition was not medical, but existential. I knew that the only way to overcome the problems was to face them with courage. This strengthened my resolve to describe more carefully how to actually do this, as there was no information on this available other than the vaguest of philosophical descriptions. I began to tackle this lack of textbooks on the subject systematically and created training programmes for existential therapists and books describing my own way of working, as well as a Society and a Journal.

Existential therapy is a very personal therapy

This kind of existential therapy is firmly based in human living and in the philosophical wisdom I am committed to continue to study. I started teaching these ideas all over London at the end of the Seventies, first at the Arbours Association, then at the Institute of Psychotherapy and Social Studies, Antioch University and South West London College counselling courses. I founded a School at Regent's College in the 80s and the New School in the 90s. My objective was not to be clever or successful but to do justice to the suffering of the people I worked with and to spread the word about the alternatives available. None of it is valid unless it matches what people

experience and helps them liberate themselves. Any philosophy worth having has got to be fit for practice. It has to be true and real and firmly based in life itself. It can't be just about words and theories.

It is uplifting that many others have had the same intention. There are now many forms of existential therapy. Mine (Deurzen 2010, 2012) is more rooted in philosophy than most. What I find in the writings of existential philosophers are thoughts that lead me to question things. They also remind me of sacred principles and intellectual riches that are so easily forgotten. All these authors have worked hard to extract from their own life experience and depth of suffering what is of value to others. I feel a profound sense of gratitude that human beings can be so creative and inventive and so generous in sharing their understanding. It makes life worthwhile and right, in a world that continues to be riddled with conflict, anxiety, aggression, loss and sadness. I aim to contribute to the pool of wisdom, as much as I can.

The application of these existential ideas to existential psychotherapy means that clients are not offered reassurance or treatment for symptoms, nor are they prescribed positive alternative ways of thinking. Instead they are encouraged to consider their anxiety as a valid starting point for the work that has to be done. They are supported in facing facts and in finding their inner strength and resilience to make changes for the better. They usually discover to their great relief that they can affirm their freedom and capacity for choice. This is achieved in an open fair-minded conversation with a view to exploring possibilities and consequences of choices and usually with a careful weighing up of rights and duties.

Philosophy can benefit all of us, not just psychotherapy clients. It encourages us to develop moral and existential principles for ourselves. Such ideas call us to live to the full, making the most of the time we have got, unafraid of suffering, and not shirking from plumbing our own depths, in which we sometimes lock up our passions as well as our fears.

When I work with my clients I aim to help them to understand their lives better, to regain their balance, their perspective, their sense of direction and to find the meaning that they have lost or purloined, or perhaps never found in the first place. And hopefully they will discover to their delight that times of crisis are moments for reflection rather than moments where we should rush into panicky action. They learn to thrive on anxiety and find their true depth when despairing or upset. People who are engaged with something of value always surprise themselves. They find fresh energy and purpose to engage with life in a new and wholehearted fashion. A calm and kind, quiet but searching dialogue is often all it takes to help them find their depth.

In that process people learn to recognize the contradictions and paradoxes of life, to face their troubles and solve dilemmas. They also learn to decide

what is important and precious in life. I have done this job for over forty years and continue to be amazed at people's resilience and intelligence in overcoming their problems once they put their heart and mind into it. Like Camus they frequently discover how much there is to learn from the hardship and distress they have suffered. They find meaning in their past difficulties rather than experiencing them as un-overcomable limits that will forever define them. Existential therapy helps people not just to find resilience in their times of trouble, but to discover and value the personal authorship and authority that allows them to transcend their hardship. So that they learn the truth of what Camus stated so poignantly:

'In the depth of winter, I finally learnt that there was in me an invincible summer.'

(Camus, 1952)

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Being Sexual: Human Sexuality Revisited

PART TWO OF A TWO-PART PAPER*

Ernesto Spinelli

Abstract

This second part of a two-part paper seeks to develop an existentially-informed approach to human sexuality that was initially presented in an earlier paper by the author (Spinelli, 1996) and which was re-viewed in Part One (Spinelli, 2013). Part One focused on an existential response to three key assumptions regarding human sexuality that have dominated contemporary sexological thought: namely, the links between sexuality and biology; notions of normality and abnormality; and the link between sexuality and personality or identity. This second part addresses the key existential assumption that ‘existence precedes essence’ and considers its implications for an existential approach to human sexuality. In particular, it addresses questions of otherness and gender.

Key words

Essentialism, existence precedes essence, queer theory, sexual fluidity, dynamical systems theory, otherness, gender.

Note

Where necessary, I employ the acronym LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) which is intended to emphasize the diversity of alternatives to being sexual heterosexually. I am aware that this initialism is ever-expanding such that ‘Q’ (for queer or questioning), ‘I’ (for intersex), ‘A’ (for asexual), ‘P’ (for pansexual) and a second ‘T’ (for transvestite) are becoming increasingly common additions. For the sake of brevity, I have elected to keep to the most common acrostic though my hope and intent is that it will be seen to embrace all possibilities.

Being Sexual: Existence Precedes Essence

The debate regarding existential choice is often confused and conflated with the concerns regarding matters of *essence*. For example, with regard to conclusions arrived at by my original paper, a recurring view raised by authors such as Mark Medina (Medina, 2008) has been to argue in favour of an essentialist perspective on matters such as being sexual homosexually. Indeed, Medina’s paper takes issue with another existential author, the late Hans Cohn, who proposed an argument very much in

common with that in my paper.

Medina takes Cohn to task for having argued ‘that homosexuality is not a condition brought about by any specific factors’ (Cohn, 1997: p 95). Medina takes this to mean that clients’ causal explanations of their homosexuality will not be heard by those who take Cohn’s view. In doing so, in my opinion he misreads Cohn entirely. As I understand it, Cohn’s argument is that if there is no *one* cause, then *any* cause remains a meaningful, or truthful, option. *But a truthful statement is not, in itself, necessarily a statement of truth (or a true statement). Rather it is a statement to which one subscribes, believes in, lives by.* Cohn’s contention alerts therapist to this: of course, attend to all of the explanations and statements provided by clients from a standpoint of their lived truthfulness, but don’t assume them to be true (as in fixed and final and genuine) in and of themselves. It is not biology in general or *per se* that is the issue but, rather, that it is the particular *way* of biologizing being sexual. If being sexual remains predominantly linked to the assumed demands of reproduction then being sexual homosexually is not merely ‘different’ as Medina puts it. Rather, as any number of continuing attacks on being sexual homosexually make so plain, this latter view can, and does, continue to judge sexual behaviour on the basis of its assumed deviation from its ‘natural’ aim and object.

These are serious issues that Medina seems unwilling to grasp. Perhaps it is because in order to do so, he, like du Plock, is forced to challenge the essentialist foundations to their arguments. In his paper, *Is existential psychotherapy a lesbian and gay affirmative psychotherapy?* (Milton, 2000), Martin Milton summarises the dilemma: ‘[being sexual homosexually] cannot be developmental arrest, nor can it be a pathology that needs to be “cured”. This is because, for a form of sexuality to be viewed in this way, we are back to essentialist interpretations of the “truth”...’ (ibid: p 94).

Sartre’s (in)famous summary of existential thought, ‘existence precedes essence’ (Sartre, 1956: p 28) is derived from a sentence in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*: ‘The “essence” of Dasein lies in its existence’ (Heidegger 1962: p 67). For the issues surrounding an existential view of being sexual, this primal statement is of immense significance not least because the debate regarding existential choice is often confused and conflated with the concerns regarding matters of *essence*. For example, a recurring view raised by authors such as Marc Medina has been to argue in favour of an essentialist perspective wherein ‘homosexuality is an existential given that may in the future be proved to be a biological reality’ (Medina, 2008: p 132). It seems evident that Medina’s project seeks to propose homosexuality (and, implicitly LGBT in general) as a different ontology that is only understandable to those who share that ontology. Essentialist arguments place significant reliance upon biology. It is not biology in general or *per se* that is the issue but, rather, it is the particular *way* of biologizing being

sexual. Before turning to an existential view on this issue, it is important to ask: do any other alternatives to an essence-dominant perspective on being sexual exist? Yes, indeed they do.

a) Queer Theory

Queer Theory emerged in the early 1990s as a critical approach developed through a combination of both feminist and lesbian/gay studies. Its central challenge has been to dispute the notion of stable or fixed identity categories of gender and sexual expression. Its view is that identities are made up of so many factors and components that to emphasise any one characteristic is both absurd and false (Halley and Parker, 2011). As Darren Langdrige has summarised: ‘[i]n brief, queer theory is concerned with providing a challenge to fixed identities: heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual alike. The notion of a stable sexual subject is contested and traditional identity politics are challenged as forms of disciplinary regulation... Instead it is argued that identities are always multiple and unstable’ (Langdrige, 2007: p 42).

Queer theory’s challenge of dominant essentialist perspectives on being sexual, and on identity in general, are often resonant with existential phenomenology. In *Queer Theory*, Annamarie Jagose writes: ‘queer is a way of pointing ahead without knowing for certain what to point at... rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogenous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance... Queer is always an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming...’ (Jagose, 1996: e-text). And David Halperin states the issue even more succinctly: ‘Queer is...identity without an essence’ (Halperin, 1997: p 62).

b) Sexual Fluidity

In the years passed since my original paper, a good deal of compelling evidence from both quantitative and qualitative research has emerged pointing to the conclusion that, far from being ‘fixed’ in biology, our sexual identities rely far more upon constructivist variables that are influenced by any number of psycho-social factors such as conformity, locational circumstance and peer pressure (Butler, 2006; Fine, 2010). Prior ways of being sexual that are sedimented, clear, secure and satisfactory can be interpretatively reassessed and, in turn, both de-sediment and re-sediment into differing ways of being sexual. Lisa Diamond’s influential text, *Sexual Fluidity: understanding women’s love and desire* (2008) provides a compelling case for sexual fluidity. Rather than view heterosexual or LGBT identities as rigid ‘hard-wired’ traits, Diamond argues that they are more adequately understood as fluid conditions that remain dependent upon a wide number of inter-relational and socio-cultural contextual factors.

Sexual fluidity encompasses three key ideas:

- a) the non-exclusivity in attraction to either gender;
- b) the open possibility of change in the focus of attraction;
- c) that attraction is directed toward the person, not the gender.

Over a 10-year period, Diamond's research followed the experiences of being sexual of 100 women who at the start of the study had labelled themselves as either lesbian, bisexual or 'unlabelled'. During that time period, two-thirds of the women altered their initial identity labels, one-third of them doing so at least twice. And of the new labels adopted, the most common new label was that of 'unlabelled' (Diamond, 2008). Later research has indicated that women, more than men, appear to behave more openly to the uncertain possibilities of sexual fluidity. Male sexual fluidity is more likely to be apparent in settings such as prisons and military compounds and under circumstances such as war-time conditions, where male-with-male bonding is often the only option and/or is the primary means to a reasonable level of stability under stressful circumstances. In all cases, however, the degree of sexual fluidity - or lack thereof - correlates with the ability to focus more on the person or the sexual activity rather than upon gender.

The acceptance for sexual fluidity provokes a radical challenge to a person's identity stability. Because sexual fluidity disputes essentialist stances on being sexual, it has been criticised by both heterosexual and LGBT theorists who promote such views. In reply, Diamond has written:

Perhaps we are reluctant to accept the notion of sexual fluidity because of the social and scientific implications of the phenomenon. Shifting away from sexual determinism and toward a more flexible understanding of sexuality... entails notable changes in the way we think about sexuality.... Some people will embrace such changes because they involve more expansive understandings of all individuals' sexual possibilities. Others will reject them out of fear that they might trigger a conservative backlash against lesbian/gay/bisexual individuals and jeopardize hard-won progress toward social acceptance

(Diamond, 2008: p 236).

c) Dynamical Systems Theory

Associated with the proposal of sexual fluidity, *dynamical systems theory* provides a model that seeks to explain how complex human phenomena both stabilise and change over time (Devaney, 1992). In its broadest sense, dynamical systems theory is a branch of mathematics devoted to the

analyses of complex systems. *Chaos Theory* is one of the more well-known, if often misunderstood, sub-sets of dynamical systems theory (Gribbin, 2005).

Among others, Esther Thelen has proposed a psychological form of dynamical systems theory in order to focus on issues related to human development (Thelen, 2005). This approach attempts to encompass all the possible factors that may be in operation at any given developmental moment. From this perspective, human development emerges as constantly fluid, causally non-linear and multiply determined *interaction* between any particular person and the world. This view of development as a dynamic system combines previously opposing notions of stability and instability, order and chaos into an ever-shifting continuum whose stability lies not in stasis but in the very movement or shifting between temporary stability and instability. Novel circumstances provoke novel ‘self assemblies’ that are not solely the result of a combination of genetics and culture but are, just as importantly, also influenced by the ‘interweaving of events at a given moment’ (Thelen, 2005: p 271). In this way, issues of human development reveal unique patterns arising from the interaction of time, body and experience that cannot be truly generalised nor open to rigid patterns of prediction.

Dynamical systems theory, challenges the power and appeal of essentialist theories regarding any aspect of human experience – including that of being sexual. For one, it emphasises a view of uncertain stability in any essentialist statement of being. For another, it emphasises the unique elements contained in any statement of essence thereby reducing the power of the essentialist argument as maintained through its reliance upon labelled generalisations of human experience.

d) Sexual Selection versus Social Selection

Recent, and radical, shifts in perspectives regarding the biology of being sexual reveal a convergence with the above conclusions. Joan Roughgarden’s re-configuration of the theory of sexual selection provides one significant example (Roughgarden, 2009).

The theory of Natural Selection provides the most powerful and well-established account of how species have evolved. The subsidiary theory of Sexual Selection clarifies the mechanism that permits Natural Selection. At its centre lies the assumption of competition that encourages the survival of the fittest. Males compete to fertilize as many females as possible, while females compete to select high quality mates for reproductive purposes. But how is a male’s ‘high quality’ to be discerned? Through secondary characteristics – size, shape, colour and so forth. The classic example evoked to clarify Sexual Selection is that of the peahen’s choice of the peacock with the most dazzling train of feathers.

Roughgarden’s research and her subsequent hypothesis challenges Sexual

Selection as it is most commonly understood. For one thing, the evidence from observations of species behaviour often contradicts the theory. For example, Roughgarden highlights research from 2008 which suggests that, in contrast to what has been assumed, peahens disregard male plumage in making their mating choices (Roughgarden, 2009). Instead, she proposes, that far more important than Sexual Selection is what she terms as Social Selection – the development of relationships between members of species whose intent is to create and maintain a stable infrastructure for raising offspring to reproductive age. Social Selection places at least equal import on strategies of cooperation and negotiation as it does on competition. In like manner, it is not the fittest individual but the fittest cooperative organisation whose survival chances are improved. If Sexual Selection emphasises the number of offspring produced as a basis to evolutionary success, Social Selection instead focuses on the degree to which the rearing of offspring is deemed successful with regard to survival opportunities. Reproduction *per se* is the critical spur to Sexual Selection; but for Social Selection, reproduction is just one of several critical factors relevant to species survival.

Roughgarden's theory highlights two key limitations within Sexual Selection theory that are relevant to this discussion. First, in its overwhelming emphasis on gender specific universal sex roles, Sexual Selection cannot account for the compelling and abundant evidence of sex role reversal. Second, other than view it as a genetic defect or a maladaptive aberration, it cannot account for the continuing presence of homosexual or bisexual behaviour in species. With regard to the second point, Roughgarden documents evidence for recurrent homosexual and bisexual behaviour in some 450 different invertebrate species – from all-male 'orgies' by giraffes, bottlenose dolphins and killer whales, to persistent female same-sex mounting by Japanese macaque monkeys, to the same-sex societies and sexual behaviour of male longhorn sheep.

Roughgarden argues that homosexual and bisexual behaviour, viewed from the perspective of Social Selection theory, emerge as being as natural as heterosexual behaviour. In removing sexual behaviour from the exclusive 'natural imperative' of reproduction, as assumed by Sexual Selection theory, Social Selection provides an explanation of the diversity of being sexual that centres upon an emphasis of the development of cohesive relationships and social interaction patterns that enhance survival strategies.

Roughgarden proposes that the more complex and sophisticated is the social system, the more there will be an intermixing of heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual behaviour. Being sexual from this standpoint is expressive of far more than simply reproductive mating. Being sexual provides the experience of socialisation and intimacy that, in turn, enriches experiences of cooperative and coordinated behaviour as well as communal

bonding. At the same time, Social Selection challenges the dominant view of binary categories as well as the perceived exclusivity of one expression of being sexual over others as being socio-cultural constructs rather than biologically-derived expressions of normality or abnormality.

Taken together, these arguments offer significant challenges to essentialist dominated perspective of being sexual. Existential phenomenology, too, raises similar concerns which are most obviously encapsulated via the existential assumption that ‘existence precedes essence’. What the assumption proposes would appear to be self-evident; however, it continues to be expressed in ways that confuse the issue and which, however inadvertently, imply its opposite. An example of this confusion can be found in the recent text, *Skills In Existential Counselling & Psychotherapy*, by Emmy van Deurzen and Martin Adams. Deurzen and Adams rightly highlight the above assumption as a key principle of existential theory (Deurzen & Adams, 2011). They write: ‘What [existence precedes essence] means is that the fact *that* we are is more basic than *what* we are. We *are* first and define ourselves later. Moreover we are always in the process of becoming something else’ (Deurzen and Adams, 2011: p 9).

Unfortunately, although they claim to be promoting the view in question, this clarification confuses matters and emerges as yet another declaration of the precedence of essence. The problem lies in Deurzen and Adams’s emphasis on the subject, be it ‘I’ or ‘we’, as that which both *is* existentially and *becomes* as essence. This primacy fails to clarify that, from an existential standpoint, the very subject that reflects upon its existence and essence *is itself an essence*. That is to say, the ‘I’ (or ‘we’ in their statement) is already a reflective construct attempting to clarify its own construction. In brief, to argue that ‘that I am’ precedes ‘what I am’ is, at best, a limiting dilution of the existential argument. Why? because the issue is not concerned with ‘I’ (or ‘we’) but with being *per se*. As such, the argument that existence precedes essence is more accurately an attempt to clarify that being precedes any particular form or structure – such as ‘I’ – that being might adopt.

The point being made here is not simply a matter of semantics. While it is the case that human language cannot but essentialise or ‘thing-ify’ lived experience, it remains crucial to avoid the false foundational primacy of the ‘I’ (or ‘we’ as in the case of the above quote). *That* being is (or, more accurately, that being continually becomes) precedes *what* being is (which is to say, both *what* structure being adopts and *how* being is expressed through it).

With regard to the issue of essence as viewed from the standpoint of being sexual, an interpretation of ‘existence precedes essence’ from the standpoint of a foundational ‘I’ (that I am) paradoxically elevates an essentialist position such that one could conclude, for example, that being heterosexual or LGBT expresses *that* which I am as opposed to *what* I am.

What is lost in this stance is the revolutionary claim being made by existential theory which, from the standpoint of being sexual can be re-phrased in the following way: *Being sexual precedes whatever form, structure or expression that being sexual chooses to adopt.*

Even at the more everyday level of subjectivist-dominated language, the radical shift being proposed by the argument ‘existence precedes essence’ can be partly (if still problematically) expressed in the following way: *The statement ‘I am heterosexual/LGBT’ is not the same as the statement ‘I am being heterosexual/LGBT’.* The former expresses a viewpoint that is mired in its primacy of essence. The latter at least approaches the dynamic of an ever-becoming being by seeking to express a view that acknowledges that being as reflected through the structure ‘I’ is labelling it-self as heterosexual/LGBT. Clumsy as it may be linguistically, this latter statement admits at the very least a potential fluidity, an awareness that ‘being is (becoming)’ prior to any subjective statement asserting its own essence (that I am) or identity (who or what I am).

Being Sexual: Otherness

Underpinning the essentialist arguments surrounding being sexual lies a related concern: to essentialise permits the appeal (or accusation) of *otherness*.

As was previously raised, the views of various authors have insisted that to not view being sexual homosexually as a unique and distinct expression such that comparisons with any other expression of being sexual – and being sexual heterosexually in particular – is at best misleading and at worst a further example of hetero-sexist attempts to deny the equal standing of being sexual homosexually. In a related fashion, it has been asserted that “[being sexual homosexually] is constructed in very different ways to heterosexual identities and experiences’ (Milton, 2000: p 94). And in her paper, *Rethinking Sexual Identity*, Catherine Crabtree argues that these differences in labelling ways of being sexual have ‘significant implications for the meanings which individuals ascribe, and which are ascribed to, particular sexual feelings, acts and relations, and thus for the way in which sexual identity is experienced’ (Crabtree, 2009: p 250).

Once again, it seems to me that such perspectives are valid if one adopts a fundamentally essentialist stance. From an existential stance, however, they are far more problematic. Of course, one can argue that differing structures provide different modes of expressing, and experiencing, being. But this is not, as I see it at least, the existential argument. Instead, what existential theory argues is that being sexual (however expressed) is the common human baseline through which all the different structures and expressions of being sexual emerge. The differences only arise out of the shared human foundation of being sexual. To emphasise and elevate only the emergent differences takes us to positions and arguments

that make little sense within an existential perspective.

More to the point, all such statements reveal an appeal to an alien and inevitably unbridgeable ‘otherness’. Existential theory also posits the ultimate mystery of ‘the other’. But this existential ‘other’ is not just, or even principally, the external other who is but one of a world of others with whom the ‘I’ is contrasted. The existential ‘other’ resides as much ‘within’ as ‘without’. Indeed, existentially, ‘I am (an) other’, This sense of otherness is, therefore, both intra- and inter-subjective. It’s not that the dominant have no label for themselves; their label cannot truly be separated from that placed upon the other.

a) Labelling

Gore Vidal has noted that ‘heterosexuality [is] a weird concept of recent origin and terrible consequences’ (Vidal, 1995: p vii). He goes on to argue that with the invention of heterosexuality, ‘there had to be another word to denote the opposite, and thus “homosexuality” was invented....The division has led to endless trouble for many men and women...’ (Vidal, 1995: p ix)

Today, we typically understand the terms ‘heterosexual’, ‘homosexual’ and ‘bisexual’ to refer to opposite sex attractions, same-sex attractions and varying degrees of attractions to either sex. As Pierre Tremblay and Richard Ramsay have argued however, until recently ‘sexual orientation has been perceived in the traditional form of the “binary”. One was to be either homosexual or heterosexual’ (Tremblay & Ramsay, 2004: e-paper). The introduction of subsequent distinct labels such as ‘bisexual’ has made it obvious that ‘the prior dominant categories of homosexual and heterosexual create false binaries and therefore give us inadequate information and impression’ (Leck, 2000: p 332). Such additions and challenges to labels associated with being sexual reveal that rather than having a fixed and firm foundational meaning, such labels are constantly open to redefinition, extension and re-evaluation.

In *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, Jonathan Katz’s research revealed that the terms ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ were both invented at the end of the 19th century (Katz, 1995). Further, prior to the 1930s, the primary associations made with the term heterosexuality were linked to states or behaviours designated as *abnormal*.

[H]eterosexuality [had not] yet attained the status of normal. In 1901, Dorland’s Medical Dictionary, published in Philadelphia, continued to define ‘Heterosexuality’ as ‘Abnormal or perverted appetite toward the opposite sex.’[The] 1923 Webster’s defined ‘heterosexuality’ as a ‘Med.’ term meaning ‘morbid sexual passion for one of the opposite sex.’ Only in 1934 does

'heterosexuality' first appear in Webster's hefty Second Edition Unabridged defined in what is still the dominant modern mode. There, heterosexuality is finally a 'manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex; normal sexuality.' Heterosexuality had finally attained the status of norm.

(Katz, 1995 quoted in Tremblay & Ramsay, 2004: e-paper).

Once established, the binary terms took on a fixedness of meaning whose rigidity did not easily allow for the acknowledgement of further labels. Until relatively recently, there was major resistance, for example, to the acceptance of bisexuality as a valid label.

In gay and lesbian communities, the general response to bisexual individuals has been to negate their existence because they were perceived to challenge the belief that only heterosexual and homosexual people existed. Tisdale (1998) writes: 'Many gay activists see any talk of bisexuality as diluting the coherence of the community, particularly damaging in a time of attack... Others simply don't believe in bisexuality.... As a result, there were great abuses by gay and lesbian identified individual (and professionals with similar beliefs, including therapists) of individuals daring to assert that their sexual attractions included both sexes.

(Tremblay & Ramsay, 2004: e-paper).

Viewed from a cross-cultural perspective, this rigid adherence to preferred labels can be seen to become even more problematic. Holt Parker has concluded: 'Our division of hetero versus homo... is a parochial affair... [I]f we impose our categories on another culture, we are making a crude mistake. When it comes to "talking sex," we are at best speaking with an atrocious accent. At worst, we are speaking incomprehensible gibberish' (Parker, 2001: p 348).

Nonetheless, once established, the power of labels to confirm and assert a classificatory divide is all too evident. If in significant ways one's sense of oneself is dependent upon the validation of the label and, through it, the delineation of difference, then all manner of questionable 'evidence' intended to maintain the label can be called into play. One such example can be seen in the claims regarding the presence and/or discovery of 'the gay gene'.

The ever-elusive 'gay gene' was initially thought to be located in the X-linked DNA segment (Hamer, 1994; Le Vay, 1996). Although it generated a good deal of initial excitement and media coverage, further research has found no evidence whatsoever to support the idea of a 'gay gene' (Wilson & Rahman, 2005). In similar fashion, claims to have identified anatomical

differences between male heterosexual and gay brains have failed to be supported by any reliable evidence. Here, too, following an initial claim for the evidence of such, further research has strongly disconfirmed such views (Tremblay & Ramsay, 2004).

Once again, the power of the label, rather than that to which the label seeks to allude or clarify, is the key to the issue. If we consider the significance of labels relating to ways of being sexual, we can see that such labels not only have come to designate difference but have also been bequeathed with judgemental authority. It is in the interest of all who at least accept these claims of difference to locate the avowed differences in some sort of ‘essentialist given’ such as genes or brains. But further, such differences are also ascribed with positive or negative core values. The subsequent social and personal impact of these strategies can be seen to be of major significance in terms of how one is to be identified and treated within a society. And with this, *the power of the differentiating label is further magnified by all concerned*. Under such essentialist circumstances, the claim on all sides must be ‘I have always been’ rather than ‘I became’ or ‘I am being’.

If the labels were merely attempts to categorise difference, the persistent allegiance to essentialist perspectives on being sexual would not be so rigid. It is the plethora of value judgements associated with such label differences that maintain their divisive power. It is not difficult to understand the appeal of essentialist arguments not only for those who employ such in order to diminish and ostracise but as well for those who have been, and continue to be, ostracised. It is the unwanted and unexpected consequences that such arguments can generate that raises concern.

Essentialising being sexual permits self and group identification but also demands differentiation. Significantly, it provides the means to divide and to mystify. To belong to one group in this way allows its members to claim knowledge or awareness that belongs only to that group and which cannot be shared by members of alternate groups. This argument would have it, for example, that ‘being sexual homosexually’ is a distinct ‘given’ that can be fully discernible only to those who are so identified. Similar arguments, of course, have been made by those who wish to impose an unbridgeable divide between assumptions of difference between male and female consciousness, as well as differing forms of consciousness between races (e.g. Caucasian versus African versus Asian) and cultures (e.g. Semitic versus Aryan). And, in the exact same way as these, the assumed evidence for such relies upon disputable claims of biological ‘proof’, whether existent or forthcoming. For instance, as was discussed earlier, Mark Medina appears to suggest that the identification of a ‘gay gene’ would resolve crucial issues surrounding the label of homosexuality once and for all. Perhaps naively, it does not seem to occur to him that the subsequent agenda for many of those parties most interested in discovering such a gene would

be to promote the development of new ways of genetic re-structuring whose intent would be to either eliminate or restrict the passing on of such a gene. But let me present the issue from a different angle.

b) Left-handedness

Not so many years ago, in most Southern European countries, to be born left-handed immediately imposed all manner of pejorative perspectives upon the person so defined. Parents feared the onset of such a disturbing possibility. Experts of one sort or another made multiple and fearsome pronouncements regarding the dangers – physical, moral, developmental, intellectual, social and emotional – surrounding this labelled problem. Equally, they theorized as to its basis and origins – some ascribing it to in-built biological dictates, some to very early (and implicitly abnormal) life experiences. Further, they provided various prescriptions for its control and possible elimination – some of these bordering upon, if not full blown examples of, interventionist forms of torture. The adult who had not been prevented from maintaining and developing this problematic tendency was viewed as a social outcast at best, a mental, moral (quite literally ‘sinister’) and emotional degenerate at worst. Labels and nicknames were devised to identify offenders and such terms became powerful insults to employ in moments of anger or vexation serving to humiliate those so named.

In the example of left-handedness, we find something all too similar to what has been argued above. The power of the label here, as before, is not only to demarcate and distinguish, but to impose additional – and typically negative – qualities of being upon those so labelled. Had the continuing stridently negative views regarding left-handedness remained, or perhaps even intensified, it would not be surprising that such differences would generate all manner of personal, interpersonal and socio-cultural divergences between the labelled groups. Left-handed people might, for instance, begin to meet in specially designated ‘left-handed locations’ where they could engage with other ‘left-handers’ or carry out any number of activities in ways that did not ostracise, and might even permit a celebration of their left-handedness. And perhaps, as well, views regarding a distinct ‘left-handed consciousness’, understandable only to those who were left-handed, might begin to emerge and provide the means to link left-handedness to identity in profound ways and, through such, raise justifiable demands for socio-political legal standing, equality, and respect for members of the left-handed minority in a right-handed majority society.

But all of the above, nor anything like it, did not occur. For whatever reasons, society’s fears of left-handedness dissipated. Yes, left-handed and right-handed people today might well continue to acknowledge genuine differences in behaviours such as those related to the manipulation of objects.

But the idea that such differences either suggest or reveal distinct, generalisable modes of consciousness accessible only to members of either group and which, more importantly, provoke altogether different foundational expressions of being seems at best, a remote and somewhat laughable proposition.

What makes it so unlikely is that the acknowledged differences between the two groups suggest nothing that is linked or related to notions of natural or unnatural, normal or abnormal, healthy and unhealthy, and the like. It may be a 'given' that humans may engage with the self, others and the world from a right-handed or left-handed – or even ambidextrous – mode of being. That should not lead us to suppose that this difference in mode can – or should – lead us to generalise significant foundational variants in psyche and identity exclusive to each group alone.

This is not to minimize nor deny the great many problems, confusions, dangers and complexities that can and do arise for all – and in particular for those whose way of being sexual is linked to notions of differences that are in turn associated with acts of exclusion and statements of degeneracy. What *is* being suggested is that the significance in these differences is not in the differences themselves. Rather, from an existential perspective, the resulting differences can be seen as mutually construed expressions of relatedness rather than inevitable conditions of an exclusivity that is indicative of a foundational essence, or 'given'.

Being Sexual: Gender

Many of the arguments focused on the previously discussed issues of existential choice, existence/essence and otherness are reprised in gender-focused concerns regarding being sexual. Meg Barker in her paper, *Bridget Jones' Pants and Vaginismus*, raises the question: 'Perhaps the reason for the lack of consideration of gender within existentialist philosophy and therapy is the fact that existentialists do not believe in any natural differences between different groups of human beings, such as men and women' (Barker, 2011: p 204). Related papers, such as Catherine Crabtree's *Rethinking Sexual Identity*, take issue with this same existential position and argue instead in favour of inherent differences in sexual labels such as gender (Crabtree, 2009). In taking up her concerns regarding my original paper, she writes:

Although he argues for the 'constructivist' rather than biological nature of our sexual identities... his focus on the 'inherent' seems to contradict this position, by suggesting that there is a pre-social realm of sexual manifestations which can somehow be understood outside of the context in which they occur.... This has significant implications for the meanings which individuals ascribe, and which are ascribed to, particular sexual feelings,

acts and relations, and thus for the way in which sexual identity is experienced

(Crabtree, 2009: p 250)

Further, pursuing a related argument, she proposes that ‘Only those who depart from the dominant system have cause to label themselves; those who work within it remain more unselfconscious’ (ibid. p 255).

Developing a similar critical perspective, Aloysius Joseph in his text, *An Inquiry Into Sexual Difference In Ernesto Spinelli’s Psychology: an Irigarayan Critique and response to Ernesto Spinelli’s psychology*, argues that ‘[w]hile existential phenomenology... acknowledges the social, political, historical and cultural engendering of the subject, it... fails to recognize that the factors constituting our lived experience are themselves derivative of a collective and shared discourse that is framed by a phallogocentric economy of relations’ (Joseph, 2009: p 18). Further, he asserts that ‘[e]xistential phenomenologists describe inter-subjectivity as if it is constituted through our embodied subject’s interaction with another embodied subject of the same kind, overlooking the sexually specific differences of the two subjects – both sensory and morphological’ (ibid: pp 12-13).

Much of Joseph’s thesis, as the sub-title to his book attests, is derived from arguments developed by the philosopher and psycho-analyst, Luce Irigaray. Irigaray’s challenging views are complex and continually evolving which does not make it an easy task to provide a summary that sufficiently respects their originality and power. Be that as it may...

Irigaray argues that female subjectivity has not, as yet, been identified because it continues to be assimilated to male subjectivity. Being female is associated with issues of unthinking matter and nature, but there is not, as yet, a genuinely distinct female subjectivity. Irigaray contends that women are only truly defined through their role as ‘mother’ (whether they are or are not themselves actual mothers) such that their identities arise only through that role. Society values this role, protects it, and recognises its dependence upon it but the price for women is nothing less than that of failing to become their own subjects in the world. In contrast to men who are their own subjects, women are ‘the other’ in relation to male subjects (which is to say that their role is to support male subjectivity). Only when women achieve their own subjectivity will there be the emergence of genuine sexual difference. Until then, sexual difference does not exist other than from the biased perspective of male subjectivity (Irigaray, 1985).

When any discourse occurs between men and women (or, indeed, between men and men or women and women) the discourse is currently always and only one of male subjectivity. This argument provides the basis for Joseph’s critique of both my own ‘psychology’ (as his title over-generously puts it)

and of existential phenomenology in general. For, as therapists engaged in discourse with our clients, we fail to at the very least understand the phallogentric nature of our way of talking, hearing and thinking with and about them (and ourselves), thereby severely limiting the existential project's aim to respond to clients (and, most obviously, female clients), and to engage in relationships with them (be they male or female) as truly subjective others.

Irigaray's project has been to first critique phallogentric subjectivity, then to set out the conditions that would define a second subjectivity and third to develop and define a relationship of subjectivities rather than relationships where only a single (male) subject exists or can be defined. To enter into this last possibility, Irigaray asserts, requires new modes of thinking and speaking. '[I]nventing a new relationship is fundamentally the same as inventing a new socio-cultural order... For me sexual difference is a fundamental parameter of the socio-cultural order...' (Irigaray et al, 1995: p 105).

I wish to neither minimise nor dismiss all of the above arguments. They express carefully considered perspectives and conclusions that demand serious consideration. Nonetheless, several concerns remain.

First, as Barker argues, the question of gender is not typically seen to be a 'given' within existential-phenomenological theory. In part, this is due to an existential wariness in over-generalising differences into unsuitable categories of division. And, as well, with regard to gender, Beauvoir's conclusion that '[o]ne is not born but rather one becomes a woman' still dominates much of existential theory (Beauvoir, 1949: p 295 quoted in Barker, 2011: p 204). Perhaps most importantly, however, as Barker herself acknowledges, is the concern that 'gendered roles vary across dimensions such as culture, class, generation, sexuality... it is worth approaching each client with curiosity about the way such messages may play out in their world' (Barker, 2011: pp 213-214).

In line with this last view, the issue is not so much whether, as Crabtree states, there exists 'a pre-social realm of sexual manifestations which can somehow be understood outside of the context in which they occur' (Crabtree, 2009: p 250) but rather that such manifestations are expressions of embodied existence from the focus of being sexual. In this sense, it is existence which is sourced at a pre-social realm and which is then construed from a variety of foci – including that of gender and the variations of being sexual. That being sexual is experienced in a variety of ways – or even in constructively-derived *unique* ways, undoubtedly acknowledges differences in meaning and experience. The dilemma is whether it makes sense to categorise those differences into fixed and generalised 'givens' such as gender.

Current Western cultural perspectives perceive gender from the standpoint of binaries – male and female. But as was discussed above, such binaries are open to reconsideration. In her book, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler

argues that although earlier feminists had rejected biological narratives of gender, they had nonetheless maintained a binary view of gender. Instead, she proposes that rather than being a fixed 'given', gender is more appropriately viewed from the perspective of variable fluidity whose shifts express its response to, and relation with, differing contexts. 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender;... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler, 2006: p 25). For Butler, gender is, more accurately, a performance – *an act of gendering, or of being gendered* – it is what is done, rather than who one is.

Culturally-derived gender configurations may become so fixed within a culture that they not only appear to be 'natural' but also serve to define crucial biases and assumptions within that culture. But this should not obscure their origins or flexibility. By creating 'gender trouble' – which is to say, by altering the form which a gender performance adopts – traditional, seemingly 'essentialist' assumptions of gender can be subverted.

In similar fashion, Joan Roughgarden's work (briefly discussed above) highlights the diversity and flexibility of gender roles and expression based on changes in social and environmental circumstances. Under such conditions, reversals of gender roles are not uncommon in many species. Roughgarden also highlights the existence of *gender multiplicity* in many species which reveals differing typologies of gender extending beyond the more 'natural' binary of male and female (Roughgarden, 2009).

And, in human gender studies focused upon the biological-bases to gender differences, the predominant evidence reveals no significant link between gendered behaviour and either differences in hormonal levels or activity (Fine, 2010), or in more general brain functioning (Jordan-Young, 2011). Physiological differences as the source to essentialist divisions of gender appear to have no basis in scientific research; gender emerges as a socio-cultural construct.

That the essentialist basis to gender remains, at best, a question for further debate, should in no way invalidate the various concerns raised regarding the acknowledgement of differences. Differences may well be so seemingly fixed along socio-cultural divides that, as Butler highlights, they appear to all within that culture as 'natural' and, hence, shared by all in a roughly equal or similar fashion. Nor is it the case that existential phenomenology proposes, as Crabtree wonders, that 'different identities/orientations can be freely chosen at will' (Crabtree, 2009: p 254). Rather, as was discussed above, existential choice is not always, nor frequently, about the selection of alternatives. Rather it is concerned with the acknowledgement or acceptance as that which presents itself as a single option from the standpoint of 'I am being' rather than from the fixed stance of 'I am'. This shift in stance permits a novel experience of relatedness

that opens previously unforeseen possibilities within the identified condition. Further, it highlights that the issue of difference cannot be so easily demarcated along clear-cut generalised socio-cultural divides such as gender and sexual identity. Perhaps most significantly, this view of difference acknowledges the inseparability of difference and sameness.

Existentially speaking, if each of us is different (or unique), that difference can only be experienced because of a foundational set of shared constituents or ‘givens’. As was stated in my original paper, differences in gender or identity

express the very same intersubjective desires... as can be ascertained in all other... manifestations. That such may be the chosen means by which an individual both expresses and avoids intersubjective anxieties, that such may both allow and prevent particular forms of self/other dialogue, that they may be dependent upon interpretational distinctions as to what form of dialogue is acceptable or desirable with reference to particular categories of ‘others’, reveals nothing that is not similarly revealed in any other form of... relation, such that to distinguish [any particular expression of difference] as inherently different [i.e. a difference of kind or essence].... must be challenged

(Spinelli, 1996: p 13)

Although several commentators took exception to this argument, I continue to stand by it. It seems to me that their concerns reveal a non-relational understanding of difference. Of course, it is vital to acknowledge difference and to be clear, perhaps particularly when working therapeutically with issues of difference such as gender and identity, ‘of to the possibility that discrimination may well still be part of ... [clients’]... lived reality’ (Crabtree, 2009: p 255). But such an attunement, it seems to me, ought to be ever-present in *all* encounters with clients, and others in general.

This takes me to the views and concerns expressed within the work of Luce Irigaray. While I continue to prize the perspective and challenges she brings through her analyses, I retain a degree of unease with what seems to me something approaching a circularity of argument that is to be found in many psycho-analytically influenced conclusions. If Irigaray is correct and all current discourses on subjectivity are phallogentric, then it must be the case that her discourse is as well. It may be critical of phallogentricism but, by her own analyses, how can one know with certainty that it has somehow evaded phallogentricism’s restrictive grasp? There seems to be no way out of this dilemma. How can one know, for example, that a separate female subjectivity has emerged without maintaining a suspicion that it may be yet one more expression of phallogentric subjectivity? And if such is the case, then what remains is a conclusion that no matter what

the expression of subjectivity, it might yet still be phallogentric. But if so, then how can we speak of, or postulate, difference in the way that Irigaray wishes to?

Might not this conundrum only be broken if we reject its essentialist assumption of foundationally inherent gender differences? If we were to do so, we would still be able – indeed, obliged – to address matters of difference. But these would be expressed from a perspective that acknowledged such differences as interpretative variations arising out of a shared grounding. This view would in no way diminish the significance of dominant modes of thought and language that restrict, inhibit, and proscribe. Nor would it encourage the denial of the ‘otherness of the other’ – however that ‘other’ self-defines or is defined.

In this regard, Acton’s concern (echoing that of other writers) ‘who are we [i.e. existential therapists] to disabuse someone who wants the label and its positive effects?’ (Acton, 2010: p 358) can be answered with as much clarity as one can muster: *it is not our aim to disabuse*. It is our aim, however, to clarify with clients just what it may be about any particular label and its positive effects that is of significance to them so that its relation to that which provokes that sense of unease and disturbance that is being brought to therapy can be more adequately explored. That such explorations are undertaken between beings who are different in ways that encompass so much more than variations of gender or identity, and whose links to issues of dominance and subjugation remain complex and uncertain, should not predispose us to conclude that *only* difference and power exist between them. The acknowledgement of that which *unites* persons in their diverse experiences of difference and power permits a view of greater complexity regarding these very same issues – not least by providing a dynamic perspective wherein difference and power are seen to be fluid, revealing shifting patterns of conditions and relations between beings as well as within the boundaries of any particular being’s sense of self and other.

Being Sexual As An Expression Of Aesthetics: An Imaginary Alternative

As a final way of challenging the various assumptions regarding being sexual that have been explored in this paper, I want to re-imagine the history of inquiry into human sexual being. My purpose is to demonstrate through an imaginary set of conditions that our currently dominant perspectives on being sexual reveal deep-seated socio-cultural biases that have been so profoundly ingrained in our perspectives on being that they have come to be seen to be ‘natural’ rather than interpretative. Further, I want to propose that alternative imaginary perspectives, such as the one being proposed, offer us novel and usefully apposite ways of considering

recurring dilemmas, doubts and dangers regarding being sexual.

So, let us re-imagine the history of sexology such that when its modern inquiry began in the 19th Century, the group of ‘experts’ called upon to examine the various issues and concerns regarding being sexual were not predominantly from the medical profession but, rather, were theorists and critics concerned with matters of *aesthetics* whose focus became that of ‘*the aesthetics of being sexual*’.

Theories of aesthetics originated from dominant socio-political biases surrounding the availability of the experience of beauty and perfection. 19th Century theories of aesthetics were dominated by ideas that linked aesthetics to morality such that moral propriety or goodness corresponded to the ability to recognise, appreciate and express beauty. These views on aesthetics typically posited that the ability to appreciate and exemplify beauty, and hence reveal moral goodness, particularly when focused upon artistic expression, could only reside within those persons who were morally *capable* of an aesthetic appreciation – namely, males belonging to the aristocracy, some females from the upper classes and various exceptionally suitable male representatives from the growing middle class. Indeed, the aesthetic experience was utilized as a powerful way of defining class and of providing the ‘upper’ levels of class with the evidence of their own superiority over ‘lower’ classes. Aesthetics was seen as a higher order faculty reserved only to those who had moved beyond the baser demands and necessities of living (Sheppard, 1987).

Problems with this view began to arise when examples of aesthetic expression and appreciation were acknowledged to have originated by those who, it was claimed, were not equipped to recognise and appreciate aesthetic beauty – those such as ‘primitives’ from non-Western societies as well as male and female creative thinkers and artists who did not come from the appropriate class background. These challenges eventually forced the reconsideration of theories of aesthetics which, in turn, provoked substantial confusion and often acerbic disagreement between experts with regard as to how to define beauty, whether its link to moral values could be maintained, and which of the manifold claims as to its expression (as in music or art) were to be recognised as examples of beauty and aesthetic achievement as opposed to rubbish and filth. Eventually, the ability to appreciate beauty as well as to create expressions of it began, somewhat grudgingly, to extend to the positing of a more general, or universal, human quality (Ranciere and Rockhill, 2006). In doing so, however, aesthetics became increasingly imbued with uncertainty.

For instance, the uncertainty as to the aesthetic worth and quality of artistic expression continues to this day. Debates persist as to what is and is not an example of art, what should be venerated and what should be

dismissed. The debates, by and large, arise through the ever more extreme extension of the boundaries of aesthetics. For example, the furore regarding the aesthetic worth of works of art that were categorized as examples of Impressionism has been repeated with the appearance of Abstract Expressionism, Cubism, and Pop Art. An all-too similar furore presents itself today in debates surrounding Conceptual Art and Found Objects. But what is most interesting and significant for the concerns of this paper is that *with the appearance of each new challenge, the previously disturbing 'challengers' lose much of their perturbing effect, are typically re-evaluated as appropriate, potentially even 'sublime' expressions of beauty and, as a consequence, are embraced ever further into the mainstream of acceptability.*

Let us now consider the impact that theories of and perspectives on aesthetics might have on the experience of being sexual.

An aesthetically-focused sexology arose during the 19th century as a means to circumscribe the sorts of ways of being sexual that were to be appreciated as expressions of beauty and moral goodness. Those expressions that failed such tests were to be dismissed or denied of any aesthetic worth. Being sexual for the sake of reproduction provided a necessary 'baseline' unconscious aesthetic that could be recognised and expressed by one and all. But true, consciously attuned, aesthetics belonged only to those who could recognise genuine expressions of beauty and goodness and who could enact such sexually through appropriate ways and means. Those who persisted in being sexual in un-aesthetic ways, or who championed such as being novel expressions of aesthetics were to be criticised, shunned and/or segregated so as to avoid the spread of their morally corrupt claims of beauty and, if necessary, imprisoned or executed so as to protect those whose curiosity or inability to distinguish might well lead them to be sexual in ways that debased genuine expressions of beauty or goodness. And who was to decide what did and did not express an aesthetic way of being sexual? A select number of self-appointed experts (predominantly male, predominantly from the upper class) whose very expertise was defined through their class and status. They were experts because they were experts and as experts only they could define what was and was not appropriate and desirable or unacceptable and intolerable.

However, over time, the power to define (and limit the definitions) of being sexual in aesthetically appropriate ways was challenged and extended both by those who had initially been excluded as experts but had now found the means to greater acceptance as well as by those who had always had the recognition but who, through their own experiences or through those of respected others, sought to expand the horizons of what should and could be recognised as aesthetic expressions of being sexual. In short, the power to define was no longer as secure or as certain as it had been before.

How did such occur? In part, the process was set into motion through the very *identification* of an aesthetic expertise in being sexual. Both the expertise and its focus became talking points, arenas for discourse and theory. Various ways of being sexual aesthetically and un-aesthetically were demarcated, labelled, named. Theories of, and disputes surrounding such labels, and whether or not they revealed or were bereft of aesthetic qualities entered the public imagination. Prior to this, in their unacknowledged and unnamed state, many aesthetically transgressive and proscribed attitudes and expressions of being sexual had been contained within select groups via their secrecy and affiliation to underground movements who championed a novel expression of aesthetics that was appreciated only by that clandestine minority. Now, however, having become the focus of discourse and debate, much of their mystique and ‘otherness’ began to dissipate. In doing so, they moved into the open, gained increasing acceptance and subsequently became established as novel and desirable expressions of the dominant perspective of aesthetics. In some cases, they even became so generally embraced that they became the standard bearers of a safe and secure normality. Consider, for example, how both oral and anal intercourse moved from the inappropriate and illegal to the ordinary. Or how pornography has shifted so rapidly from the hidden and suppressed to the open terrain which it inhabits today. Or how, at least in some cultures, being sexual homosexually has gone from the unnameable and criminal to levels of acceptability than even a couple of decades ago would have seemed inconceivable. Or how the current interest in sado-masochistic ways of being sexual has been aroused through the phenomenal success of a best-selling novel. Ways of being sexual that not so long ago would have been seen as transgressive or at least unusual and undesirable – to be appreciated and enacted only by those who inhabited an aesthetically dubious sexual underground – can be seen to shift rapidly into the domain of the mainstream, to the everyday and expected norm – the ordinary.

Viewed in this way, the aesthetic imagination regarding being sexual, just like its artistic counterpart, must of necessity constantly seek out novel transgressive ground from which to challenge dominant contemporary notions of acceptability and definability. It cannot stand still. Once invoked, the aesthetic boundaries of sexual expression cannot remain fixed and stable. If imagination is to survive, it must continue to imagine and, via its acts of imagination, it must challenge its current boundaries, most often by extending such. In doing so, not only can it transform that which was once scorned or even demonized such that it becomes ‘normal’ or, possibly, even an elevated expression of sexual aesthetics, it also, of necessity, brings ever closer to the fold that which was once at the furthest reaches of the proscribed and unacceptable. Every underground movement has the

potential to journey toward the surface of the mainstream. Just as past transgressive acts and behaviours have become ‘ordinary and acceptable’, so, too, then will those acts and behaviours that are currently deemed to be transgressive or even repugnant will move increasingly toward becoming absorbed into the ‘ordinary’ of the future. My own best guess, given its increasing appearance in the humour and innuendo so characteristic of sit-coms and advertising, is that bestiality (being sexual with animals other than human beings) will prove to be the next instance of this unrelenting movement from the underground to the overground. Time will tell.

Might not this aesthetically-informed perspective on being sexual, as strange and artificial as it might initially appear to be, offer a valid potential alternative to our dominant perspectives – if only insofar as it weakens their reliance upon claims to ‘naturalness’ or to an unproblematic obviousness. And is it not the case that, much more clearly than does our dominant view, the aesthetic alternative enjoins us to reconsider the issues surrounding being sexual within a wider terrain that exposes many of the confounding and confusing dilemmas that both dominate and define our current culture as expressions of the mainstream’s uneasy flirtation with that which it continues to deem as taboos? And by so doing, does not this alternative prevent us from so easily distancing ourselves from the those ways of being sexual such that they can no longer be labelled as incomprehensible or belong *only* to an alien ‘other’?

Conclusion

Our society’s current dominant concerns surrounding being sexual reveal various pivotal themes centred around issues of biology, normality and identity. . Associated with them all various voiced fears and anxieties expressing issues surrounding trust, fulfilment, joy and the preservation or gain or loss or inadequacy of each.

Such issues surrounding sexuality highlight an increasingly unpalatable realization for psychotherapists: our culture’s discourse on being sexual presents the single most telling counter-argument to our profession’s most foundational injunction: that it is ‘good to talk’. We *do* talk, and talk incessantly, about being sexual. Among other things, psychotherapy has taught us a particular *way* to talk about sexuality. It is, I believe, a way whose multitude of limitations reveal a pervasive set of values and assumptions that are themselves the source to the majority of our society’s sexual confusions and discontents.

In contrast to this, existential phenomenology proposes an alternative mode of discourse, a different way of talking and thinking about being sexual. In this, it is indebted, as with so much else, to the ideas of Martin Heidegger who, in his series of dialogues with groups of psychiatrists and

psychologists, reminded them that it is not so much *what* we talk about but rather *how* we talk about it that is pivotal to the possibilities of change (Heidegger, 2001). My arguments throughout this paper have been focused on an existential critique of dominant assumptions regarding being sexual. With Heidegger's injunction in mind, I have sought to present the outlines of ways of talking about being sexual that question several seemingly 'natural', culturally-embedded assumptions that were elaborated as key elements of modern sexology from its beginnings during the mid-19th Century. Throughout, my argument has been to demonstrate the limitations of such perspectives with regard to the lived experiences of being sexual that we all share and enact.

Following the impetus of many others, I have sought to reconfigure the issues surrounding being sexual such that they are no longer so dominated by stances and conclusions based upon essentialist dominated perspectives. Instead, I have opted for a view derived from existential phenomenology. Without doubt, the challenge of an existential perspective on being sexual is accompanied by its own fears and insecurities. Viewed as expressions of relatedness, the multiple experiential possibilities being sexual are inevitably placed within a context of uncertainty and anxiety. Is such a trade-off any sort of improvement to that which currently exists as the dominant mode of discourse? Insofar as it can begin to challenge recurring dilemmas centred upon essence, choice and difference as expressed via concerns surrounding gender, identity, and normality, I believe that existential theory offers a more adequate set of principles with which to clarify the human experience of being sexual. This paper has offered a possible step towards such an enterprise.

It has been a challenge, and at times a genuine struggle, to write this paper and to address concerns that have been raised. I can only hope that, in turn, it will challenge its readers, provoke new questions, viewpoints and concerns and, by so doing, extend the debate.

*** Part One of this paper appeared in *Existential Analysis* 24.2**

A substantially amended version of both parts of this paper appears in the forthcoming text, *Sexuality: Existential Perspectives*, edited by Martin Milton.

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Are Sexual Preferences Existential Choices?

Some contributions to the debate initiated by Ernesto Spinelli

Victor Amorim Rodrigues

Abstract

Sexuality is commonly seen, in existential literature, either as one of the *existentialia* or as a given of existence. The author considers that neither of these positions is correct and – in a dialogue with a paper by Ernesto Spinelli – suggests that existential analysis can show how sexual preferences may be understood as existential choices. A clinical case is presented in order to illustrate this hermeneutic procedure.

Key words

Sexuality, existential, analysis, hermeneutics.

The publication of the important and polemical paper by Ernesto Spinelli, in *Existential Analysis* 24.2, incited me to establish a dialogue on the specific issue of sexuality as an existential choice.

Although the second part of the paper had yet to be published, the contents of the first part were rich enough to elicit a number of observations, so as to contribute to the debate on this subject.

In my view the paper is important because of the dearth of material on sexuality in existential literature, perhaps as Cohn (1997) suggests, as a kind of reaction to the great interest that sexuality held for Freud and for psychoanalytic theory in its early days.

On the other hand the paper is highly polemical considering the sensitivity of the debate that is taking place, all over the world, concerning gay marriage and the adoption of children by gay couples. The surprisingly huge march held in Paris last August against gay marriage, the recent controversy in Brazil about the so-called gay cure and the recent restrictive legislation in Russia against public advocacy of gay issues show us that nothing is settled once and for all on this matter and that continuous efforts are needed to support gay rights. In the light of this socio-political context, to assert that sexual orientation is an existential choice, even when properly understood, as in Spinelli's case, is inevitably a polemical position.

As a senior existential therapist in Portugal I am often asked, by younger psychologists and psychotherapists, about how existential thinking views issues of sexuality and sexual orientation and my answer has been to admit

that this is a difficult topic, still open to debate, but that three main positions can be identified in existential literature on sexuality:

- 1 In the first, sexuality is seen as an Existential, as propounded by Cohn (1997, p 14) who suggests that sexuality should be added to the 'list' of Existentials alongside temporality, spatiality, embodiment, affective disposition and so on. The author justifies this 'correction' of *Being and Time*, as if Heidegger has forgotten sexuality, saying that sexuality '*seems to me as much an intrinsic aspect of existence as mortality or intersubjectivity – we are in the world as sexual beings and confront as such the same complex interplay between what is given and the responses we choose*' (1997, p 14).

As human beings, we are unavoidably sexual beings and therefore sexuality is a predetermined feature of existence and belongs to the ontological realm.

Nevertheless the way each of us deals with this supposed Existential is unique, so the singular way-of-being-in-the-world-sexually is ontic and the result of an existential choice.

This existential choice is not some kind of 'superficial' choice, like going to the cinema tonight or staying at home, because it involves a deep commitment to an existential project.

- 2 The second position locates sexuality in general and sexual orientation in particular in the realm of facticity (Acton 2010; Medina 2008). Sexual orientation is a given of existence and I have a sexual orientation just as I was born in a particular country, have a natural family, a native language or a somatic type (dark or fair, eye colour etc.).

From this perspective, all that is left for me to choose is how to respond to this particular given, accept it or reject it, as I would do regarding my ethnic origin or original social class, accepting it for myself and others, or hiding it or adopting one of the many in-between possibilities.

These choices, which are the way I respond to this given must of course be understood in relation to the social and cultural context in which they are taken.

Not surprisingly this is the position most commonly defended by gay lobbies and associations, because it assigns an essential identity, something solid about sexual orientation: 'This is who I am, and I can't be otherwise, you have to accept this basic fact'.

It must be said that this position is strongly based on phenomenological inquiry because, as Medina puts it, '*It is certainly true that for many lesbians and gay men, the significance they attach to what they feel to be the innateness of their sexuality contributes to an enhanced sense of self*'. (2008, p 130).

And in the experience of many heterosexuals and homosexuals alike, there is a strongly rooted sense of always having been the way they are,

as long as they can remember and that they cannot even imagine being otherwise, leading them to say ‘*If I changed that part of who I am, it wouldn’t be me anymore*’.

- 3 Some religious leaders defend a convenient position that may be confused with an existential flavour. Rejecting that sexual orientation is somehow determined biologically or psychologically, they argue that it is a lifestyle choice, implying that personal choice is the sole responsibility of the person, who if he or she wanted, could choose another way of life, one which was not sinful but in line with God’s commandments, which allegedly condone some forms of sexual behaviour and not others.

This seems to be the position of Paul (Romans 1:27) when he writes *Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of women, burned in their lust for one another, men with men (...)*

As no one seriously defends this last position in existential psychotherapeutic circles (although we must be ready to discuss it, as it is dressed up as existentialism because of the stress on choice), I shall now discuss the first and second positions, arguing that they are partially right and partially wrong and that it is possible to map out a third position correctly based on existential thinking.

I shall try to illustrate this third position with the help of a clinical case, but first I would like to make some comments on what I regard as equivocations in the first and second positions on sexuality, from the point of view of an existential enquiry:

A) Sexuality is not an Existential.

As we have seen, Heidegger did not offer us a list of *Existentialia*, so Cohn (1988) proposes to add sexuality to this list. I argue that Heidegger did not forget sexuality in his *Analytic of Dasein*. In fact, sexuality does not have the same ontological status as temporality, spatiality, embodiment, comprehension or affective disposition.

We should always bear in mind that the notion of Dasein is not the same as human being or human reality. Although the only known being that has Dasein as its way of being is the human being, I would propose to the readers the following thought experiment as an exercise in eidetic variation, an established procedure in phenomenological method:

Imagine a planet where there are aliens who, like human beings, have the character of existence that is openness where beings can show themselves *qua* beings. Mountains appear as mountains, rivers as rivers, and other Daseins as Daseins.

On this planet there even existed one of these aliens who described the structure of Dasein in much the same way Heidegger did. Of course, in order to have the structure of Dasein these aliens are temporal and spatial beings, have bodies (of a very different shape from a human body), have

understanding and moods and can refer to the various things of their world through their own kind of language.

They think they are the only beings that have existence as their way of being, because they are unaware that, millions of light years away there is our planet Earth with human beings that also have existence as their way of being.

It is obvious that these aliens not only are, but they exist, in the existential sense, but now let us imagine that, unlike human beings they reproduce themselves by asexual reproduction (either fragmentation or parthenogenesis) due to the vicissitudes of biological evolution on their planet. Although their world is a relational world, that is, they still have the character of being-in-the-world-with-others, they are totally unaware of sexuality, which simply did not occur in the living beings of that planet.

I think it is easy to see that while we cannot even imagine their (or any other) existence without being temporal or embodied for instance, we can perfectly imagine it, without contradiction, without sexuality, simply because sexuality belongs to the ontic, not the ontological realm.

As Gallagher & Zahavi say

Heidegger, who is not exactly known as a philosopher of the body, chose a neuter, 'das Dasein', as the central term for human existence. And as Heidegger points out in the lecture course Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang von Leibniz from 1928, the neutrality of Dasein entails an asexuality (eine Geschlechtslosigkeit)

(2012, p 146).

B) Acknowledging that sexuality is ontic but that, paradoxically, I am always unavoidably a sexual being, it would be easy to deduce that sexuality belongs to the realm of facticity, as perhaps a certain biological predisposition or a fixed result determined by some early experiences internalized as an array of internal objects.

Whilst it is true that phenomenological research lends support to this position, based on the description of the lived experience of people who feel they don't have any choice regarding their sexual preferences and that they just are the way they are, we must bear in mind that existential analysis is much more than staying close to the lived experience of subjects but also involves uncovering the existential meaning of behaviour, mental phenomena, personality, in short, the peculiar characteristics of the unique way-of-being of that person.

I propose that one singular way-of-being-sexual is as an existential choice, in line with Spinelli's paper but explained in a quite different manner. Our sexuality is consistently connected with our worldview, especially the way

we value and interpret the status and balance of masculinity and femininity and, more importantly, our sexual preferences are intelligible in a way that can be revealed during the course of existential analysis, leading to a full or, more often than not, partial understanding of their origins. Admittedly, if human behaviour and mental phenomena are commonly held to be intelligible by all kinds of comprehensive psychotherapy and if that bodily behaviour is meaningful, why then should human sexuality be any different? Why should sexuality be cast out to some sort of factual or hyletic domain? Why should we give up on trying to understand its meaning in the same way we seek to comprehend other aspects of existence? Why not just try to analyse the way of being in the world of that person, his or her worldview and the uncovering of the un-reflected assumptions of this particular worldview?

The procedure on which I am proposing to cast some light is our clients' sexual preferences that will, I hope, become clearer if we analyse the following clinical case:

Peter G. is a 44-year-old clinical psychologist who works in a general hospital, where he attends patients in the rheumatology and oncology departments. He is known as an excellent professional in the field of health psychology and also trains and supervises psychodynamic psychotherapists.

He considers himself to be bisexual, self-classifying as a 4 on the Kinsey scale. He is currently married to a woman and regards himself as stable and satisfied with his marriage. He realizes that he prefers men for sexual intercourse but feels that, for him, it is more difficult to establish a long-term commitment with a same sex partner. *'It's not just the social censure, but also the more unstable nature of male sexuality'*, he tells his friends. *'It's like my food preferences, I like both meat and fish and I eat both. Quite honestly, I prefer meat but fish is better for my health in the long term'*.

As a psychologist with psychodynamic training he has always wanted to know more about the unconscious routes of his sexual preferences. Unfortunately the psychodynamic psychotherapy he underwent as part of his training, although considered successful in other regards, was not of much help on this issue. His female therapist looked on sexual orientation as something not analysable, just like left handedness. *'All we can understand is the reaction you have to it, accepting the nature of your desire or rejecting it, the latter attitude being a source of pathology,'* she used to say.

Peter was never convinced by these assertions and he argued that *'specific sexual preferences cannot be determined biologically, only as regards the most general tendencies'*.

Peter has married twice and between marriages he had a relationship with a man. The first marriage, with a fellow student from university, took place immediately after Peter graduated and got a job at the hospital, and lasted around five years. They had a daughter and the marriage ended because Peter fell in love with a male nurse who also worked at the hospital.

He then moved in with this partner which needed considerable courage since it provoked a lot of gossip within the hospital community, but by this time he was already highly respected and, after the initial surprise their relationship, which lasted around six years, was accepted. This partner then died in a car accident and a few months later Peter married a female friend of the couple, who had secretly been in love with Peter all this time. He has a son from this last marriage.

Although sexually flexible, Peter has a specific sexual scene that he fantasises about a lot and gives him full sexual satisfaction. He calls it '*fucking the macho men*' and it involves being strictly on top in sexual intercourse with men with extremely masculine appearance and mannerisms, preferably with (what are regarded as) male jobs like construction workers, firemen, truck drivers, policemen or military personnel, or even street hustlers that need some money.

He looks for variations of this theme with porn videos on the internet and gets in a very good mood when he actually finds an appropriate partner to fulfil it. He feels an extra excitement when he sometimes feels confident enough to talk dirty, slightly humiliating his sexual partner, stressing that his partner is in a female position feeling his manhood. If the bottom partner has a resigned posture with no erection then that excites Peter even more.

After his companion's death Peter went in search of existential analysis, thinking that it was a type of psychodynamic therapy better able to address the issues of mourning and grief he was experiencing, having read Yalom and Fromm.

He thought of using this second therapy to explore the areas in the working of his mind not sufficiently analysed, specifically his sexual preferences.

It is not possible to report here all the details of what happened in the course of this second therapy but during some sessions we became centred on exploring and revealing the assumptions of his worldview, specifically regarding his notions (and prejudices) about what he considered masculinity and femininity, what it is to be male or female, what the whole issue of sexuality means.

At the same time, analysis of his existential project required a detailed exploration of his life history: Peter is the eldest child of a policeman and he remembers the first time he was aware both of his attraction to the male body and of the associated social censure.

Although his father was described as a man of action he also had cultural interests and enjoyed seeing theatre, dance and opera on television. Peter remembers an episode with his father, when he was around five years old. They were watching a classic ballet on TV, side by side, and they were enjoying a beautiful solo of the prima ballerina and they were both delighted with her gracious movements. They looked at each other with the complicity of enjoyment and Peter still remembers this moment as one of the occasions

he felt closest to his father. But then the atmosphere changed when it was time for a male solo and Peter was equally or even more delighted with not only the grace but also the strength and power that sprang from the muscular legs, the breadth of arm movements and especially the powerful jumps performed by the dancer who was exhibiting himself to the female in what Peter intuitively interpreted as some kind of male exhibition. He searched for the same look of complicity in his father's face but this time to no avail, as not only did his father not return his look but manifested an expression of what he interpreted as not being pleased by his son's enthusiasm. In that moment he intuitively learned that to show the same kind of enthusiasm for a male body as for a female body is not approved of under some kind of tacit rule.

During his childhood Peter spent a lot of time at his father's police station after school and often saw rough men, supposedly criminals, being dominated and humiliated. At the same time at school there were rare but meaningful episodes where Peter felt ashamed of his now hidden sexual preferences which became more and more intense. When his male friends were fooling around accusing each other of being gay or sissies, as adolescents often do, Peter always felt these jokes with an inner impact that he knew the others did not feel, as if somehow they knew about him even though he was no more the butt of these jokes than anyone else.

These and other descriptions of his lived experiences allowed Peter to realize, in the course of therapy, how he constructed his worldview where the notion of proper masculinity and femininity had an existential meaning, to a large extent influenced by his social and family context, and especially he could see how he took a position and decided, at a fundamental level, about where he would stand in such a world.

His sexual life cannot be understood in isolation from his whole existential project, as some kind of factual foreign body in his flesh, as his first therapist thought, because it is entirely consistent with this existential project and does not exist independently of it.

Peter's project is to be powerful, a winner, whose victory must be acknowledged by the approving look of the Other. Peter grew up in a competitive family where brothers and cousins of the same age were constantly compared and encouraged to compete with each other and were classified according with their achievements as winners or losers.

Peter is considered a winner since he is viewed as a kind of medical doctor, a profession that carries a high status in the family. He likes very much to have that status and at the hospital always wears the white medical gown although as a psychologist he is not expected to do so in that hospital. He treats the physicians as colleagues and talks in an ambiguous way so that some medical doctors at hospital are not sure of his profession, thinking he might be a psychiatrist.

When he is called on to observe a rheumatology or cancer patient with behavioural problems he explains to doctors and nurses the patient's behaviour so clearly that they often try to get him alone to talk about their own relational problems with their husbands and wives, children or parents. He feels highly empowered by this attitude and likes to make people believe that he knows more about them than they know about themselves (according to his psychodynamic training he knows what is happening in their unconscious).

The same happened with the three long-term partners in Peter's life. They are all described as caring people and all complained that Peter was a little cold, but they all loved him passionately because he is bright and educated and knows how to apply his clinical skills in social and romantic relationships, achieving a lot just by a simple conversation and making the other person feel that they are being totally understood and taken care of, except in terms of their sexual needs.

In fact the sex life with all his three partners was rather monotonous and described as '*missionary position three times a week without any kind of infatuation*'. Even with his male companion, Peter insisted that it should be as close to a heterosexual relationship as possible, face to face and asking that his partner did not touch his own sexual organs while being penetrated '*as if his anus was a pussy*'. This was not what his partner liked, but as he loved Peter and all the other aspects of their life in common seemed so satisfactory he pretended to like this game to give Peter pleasure. His female wives actually did the same and Peter knew it, but there was a tacit agreement not to mention it.

As his analysis went on, Peter saw that his own sexual preferences could be intelligible and be seen as a fundamental move in a game of power, chosen, at a primordial level, in order to reject the lower rank that homosexual desire would confer on him, in the agreed scale of values in his social surroundings (which he accepted as an undisputed assumption). He refused to let his desire for male bodies transform him into a sissy, thereby lowering his social rank according with his worldview, humiliating him. He therefore reacted with a counter-attack, choosing to make a great strength of his supposed weakness and emerging as the 'male of males', the man's man, enjoying the fantasy of being an alpha male. At this highest rank possible he can, not only be a master of women (as a man should) but also master men and even transform men into women by means of his super masculinity, and of course the more masculine the male sexual partner is, the more his fantasy is rewarding.

The same way as he likes to be seen as a winner in his family, in his own private sociological analysis of the hospital community he belongs to the top rank, together with medical doctors and administrators, although, paradoxically, he is very charming to everyone regardless of people's job at the hospital.

We should notice that all of this goes on, not in his inner world as unconscious processes, but outside in his being-in-the-world-with-others and we were able to explore and reveal all of this game of power and sex, and lay it bare as long as the analysis went on. There is nothing ontological or factual in all this, but a fundamental choice of his destiny (Teixeira & Barroso, 1999) that involves his whole existence and can only be understood in the socio-cultural context of this unique life story.

In conclusion I think it is by now becoming clear, with the help of Peter's case, that sexual preferences are neither an ontological predetermination of Dasein, nor a given of existence but rather, as Spinelli posits (although using different arguments), are intelligible as existential choices in the proper sense of this term.

As, on his lucid paper about gay affirmative therapy, du Plock says

My sense, though, is that sexuality may not feel like a choice – may not be available to consideration by us in the way that we are used to choices being available – for the simple reason that it is a choice of a different type, a part of the individual's fundamental project.

(1997, p 221)

To think of sexuality as an Existential would be to misunderstand the Ontological Difference and to consider it as facticity would be to give up on analysis.

Existential analysis is the preferable procedure to elucidate (cast light on) the intelligibility of whatever shows itself in the clearing (lichtung) thereby doing justice to the character of Logos which 'is a letting-something-be-seen'

(Heidegger, 1962: p 56)

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Working In Controlled Environments: Ideas and Reflections On A Phenomenological Stance For Mental Health-Care Professionals

Diego Vitali

Abstract

This paper aims to show some important themes linked to the very important clinical core of ‘distance’ and ‘stance’ in the clinical work of high intensity psychiatric institutions. In particular this paper concerns patients who have clearly visible symptoms of de-personalisation, de-realisation, hallucinations or other connected phenomena – for their proximity, assonance or clear expression – to schizophrenia or psychosis. In psychiatry, we often find ourselves having difficulties with the concept of ‘distance’ in observational situations as well as when operating in more active roles like proper psychotherapy. With a view to acknowledging and at the same time tackling these difficulties directly, I have tried to design and hence to describe a phenomenological stance that I metaphorically called ‘erranza’.

Keywords

Psychiatry, Phenomenology, Heidegger, Binswanger, Minkowski, Phenomenological stance, Existence.

Introduction

In the daily working experience of a clinical psychologist employed in a psychiatry department one deals with two inescapable themes of psychopathology, one which courses towards the diagnostic inquiry and another which is drawn and grounded by the therapeutic relationship in itself. During my experience I have been involved in harnessing work with schizophrenic and psychotic patients and I have found it necessary to think about a stance which could be able to let professionals establish a strong psychotherapeutic relationship with these difficult patients.

Methods

This study was conducted on ten residential patients with the cooperation and supervision of Doctor Francesca Sbraccia, Psychotherapist and team manager at the *Schizophrenia and Psychosis Intensive Care Unit* – ULSS 13, Venice, Italy. The project aimed to design and to test the efficacy of a new relational stance to be applied with our patients at the service, with a

view to help establish/maintain a vivid and more effective therapeutic relationship with the patients. This research guided practice was conducted during the regular service and the whole therapeutic team was involved – the team was composed of 10 nurses, 2 trainee psychologists, 2 psychotherapists and 2 psychiatrists. I collected qualitative data in the form of notes (taken from harnessing observation of group and individual therapeutic activities) and audio recordings of short unstructured interviews. Data was then elaborated using phenomenology research methods and presented during our team meetings. As main investigator and conductor of group psychotherapy I was supervised daily by the service manager who gave me constant feedback on the conduction of the research project and on my clinical work as well. The emerging elements of the stance were then experimentally applied by me during my clinical work before being presented to the team again, crossed with previous results and discussed with our experts in psychotherapy, psycho-dynamic psychology, phenomenology and psychiatry.

This multidisciplinary and day by day clinical and research work enabled me not only to adjust and tailor my work as a group conductor to the very subjective nature of patient experiences, but it also opened up the possibility to observe and to extrapolate the essential elements to enable me to design the stance described in this paper.

The importance of interpersonal distances

Cargnello (2005) gives a critical account of distances in psychiatry and as a provocation he renames the role of the psychiatrist as the one of the *alienist*. Considering the clinical guidelines applied in medicine, Cargnello observed that during the diagnostic inquiry the psychiatrist names all the observed phenomena – at this stage called signs –, connects them with each other as well as with the results of the anamnestic enquiry; the signs are then inductively interconnected with the other observed phenomena as the diagnostic procedure goes along. Whenever a certain syndrome is eventually recognised as such, the signs start to be called symptoms, the subject is then called a *case* and therefore compared to other similar cases to confirm or disprove any diagnostic or prognostic hypothesis.

According to Cargnello (2005), a clinical stance like the one I described above not only keeps the patient at a sidereal distance but also prevents the opportunity for an authentic interpersonal contact with the patient. These factors observed by Cargnello are important, not only in our everyday work but also whenever we face the need to delve into the estranged worlds of psychosis. Indeed, he states that when we apply a medical approach/attitude to a psychological evaluation or intervention we may significantly affect the possibility for an effective clinical relationship with the patient; we could annihilate the chance to get any interpersonal contact at all with the psychotic or schizophrenic patient (Cargnello 2005, Galimberti 1979).

It is self-evident that a health-care professional is not forced by clinical protocol into a dehumanising relationship with the patients; however, we should consider that even if in the medical praxis empathy and carefulness in medicine are essential instruments to put the patient at ease and to help produce better therapy results (Zinn 1993), they are certainly not enough in psychiatry or at least they do not automatically serve the purpose of establishing a trustworthy and reliable therapeutic relationship. Indeed, our research guided practice took as a starting point the idea that for the purpose of establishing such a therapeutic relationship we must think of it as the encounter of two equally valuable and potentially extraordinary different existential expressions. This implies that we – as clinical staff – should be ready to take a new look, to be surprised rather than to recognise and hence be strong enough to let ourselves be guided from the other rather than observing at a safe distance.

From this perspective then, the interpersonal distances as they are posed in the clinical relationship between us and the patients are radically influenced. Distances should be indeed carefully inflected to obtain a human relationship that is primarily meant and thought of as a *medium* for trading: an instrument or perhaps a space where the traded object is always the meaning. With a view to achieving this starting point, I observed that it is of paramount importance to suspend the power of our knowledge and technique. Can we put on hold our safe and secure notions/expertise as clinical practitioners? Can we shut down – metaphorically – the explaining-power of our view of the world and the others? Can we put our truths and scientific certainties on hold with a view to approaching the patients with the attitude of someone wandering in an unknown land? The phenomenological stance that I am introducing here aims indeed to establish a clinical relationship that emerges as a mutually recognised medium, as place for the encounter that is strongly sustained by our placid readiness to welcome a view of the world as such and not as different/alternative/deviant. According to my experience, this stance offers us the opportunity for a ‘comprehension’ of the observed phenomena rather than providing mere explanations/clinical descriptions of them (Jaspers 1946). It is interesting to notice that ‘to explain’ means ‘to make level or to smooth out’, while comprehension means ‘to take together, to merge with’. Indeed, it is via this fundamental etymological difference (Verstehen vs Erklären) that Jaspers (1946) underlined the important and radical difference of being affected and feeling ourselves the objectivity of the other’s subjective experience as opposite to measuring and ordering what is ‘objective’ according to our technique and our measurement systems.

Alienation and care places

In relation to these matters, during my experience I felt that mental health services such as mental health institutes and departments should be conceived

a priori as anthropological places. Rather than mere volumes or spaces they should be seen as lived spaces – *espace vécu* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) i.e. places ‘lived in’ by people, enlightened by the human existence – where the word ‘existence’ means a certain openness, *a light which luminates whatever particular being comes into the realm of its rays [...]* (Boss, 1963). As stated by Heidegger, the being of the man itself is such a disclosure to the world insofar as we can always say that the being of the man is always being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1927). Merleau-Ponty (1945) stated that an anthropological place is at once the *a priori* condition of that *living-in*, along with the evenly essential being-there-with-others: the world is always and primordially one which everyone shares with others.

The intensive care department that is considered in this work (Comunità Terapeutica Residenziale Protetta – Psychiatric National Health Service – Venice) is a space that has this therapeutic potential and provides a fertile breeding ground for assembly and relationship. This department (C.T.R.P) is a care place where these opportunities are brought and supported through a flexible care setting where suffering and alienation experiences become the basis for the phenomenological reading of the worldviews to which they belong. This tough and challenging way to conceive a care place is committed to conceiving sufferance as a complex structure which produces meaning rather annihilates it. Psychological sufferance is indeed considered as lived experience rather than pathology and malfunction. I observed that whenever ‘we’ (as a team) were able to assume this clinical approach in conceiving the care place, then the whole therapeutic work would suddenly have a different view of the patients who may eventually start to be seen primarily as people in-the-world rather than as clinical cases. This effort to shape an anthropology of care places is meant to outline a ‘working area’ where sufferance, non-sense and therefore alienation experiences are taken as key.

As analogous to what I observed when talking about interpersonal distances, the medical approach in psychiatry could therefore also be liable to pose clinical departments as ‘places of alienation’ where patients would themselves feel like malfunctioning creatures/machines or even as prisoners; these effects on the relational level are so tangible that very often, we would also feel them as being so far away that it seems impossible to reach them within the world of their lived experience.

The naked medical praxis tries to understand the patients – where possible – only through a look which tends to see a patient’s experience as a mere entity or as an object of enquiry (Galimberti 1979). Sometimes, we could actually find ourselves merely observing the curious phenomenon produced by a certain *clinical case* which mis-perceives, mis-understands and mis-behaves. This could be a common attitude to be observed in the stuff of high intensity care places, especially where the medical model is applied to the extent that it could transform the mental health care place in a *non-place*. The

anthropological concept of *non-lieux* (Augé 2009) was coined by Augé who stated that ‘if a *place* can be defined as being relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place’ (Augé, 2009: p 77). A non-place is therefore a place that does not absorb or transmit any sense of identity to the people that animate the place; it is a place where the interactions are impersonal and most of the time they happen only according to and within the scope of certain *roles*: i.e. waiter-client, host-passenger, doctor-patient and so on. According to Augé (2009) this way of living and designing the places where we live affects interactions and interpersonal distances, produces neutral and impersonal places, and therefore injects the subjects with a certain degree of anonymity that is very difficult to contrast. I believe that in a mental health institution we should – as professionals – try to break through these adverse conditions and constitute care places as anthropological places. These places would then be able to be affected by people’s identity, to conceal and to reveal memories, and therefore to be places primarily concerned and made of relationships.

***Basso-continuo*: the base for a therapeutic relationship**

From an existential point of view, psychological suffering could be considered as the existential expression of the inherent relationship between the man, its world and the others (Borgna 2002). Whenever we apply a ‘system of measurement’ to the psycho-pathological experiences we are standing at a distance which does not allow us to ‘be-there-together’ on the level of such alienating experience. The consequent doctor-patient and also scientist-subject relationship would then constitute themselves as missed occasions to gain access to a clinical relationship *per se*. Considering an existential perspective on what we observed during our work with the patients, this medical approach could be described as shifted towards a level that is described by Heidegger (1927) as level of the ‘*One*’ also known as the level of the ‘*They-self*’. This means that during a regular psychiatric evaluation of the subject we are already injecting the relationship with a strong predetermined view of the world. The patient’s experience is already annihilated as soon as we start the diagnostic enquiry: the proof of it is that the psychiatric patient could be either sitting there waiting for us to inform him/her about his/her condition or the patient could reject any of our analysis as nonsense. This is because the view of the world – the order – that we try to inject exists *per se* and only in our scientific view of the pathology.

How can we establish a therapeutic relationship with the schizophrenic experience if our cogitations evolve just from definitions, explanations or some mere statistic inference (Jaspers 1946)? Is it possible to agree that our medical approach to the psychological suffering is liable to transform a place for a human encounter into a devitalised and devitalising one

(Cargnello 2005)? With a view to avoiding the risk of facing such a devitalising status of the place and the consequent effects on our practice I believe that the sacrifice is required on our side. That is to say that we should be able to understand when it is necessary: a) to put our medical knowledge on hold; b) to let ourselves face and embrace new and uncovered horizons of experience all the time; c) to let our cumbersome clinical presence fade on behalf of allowing room for an interpersonal space that would serve as a ‘locus for the encounter’. These efforts would strive to provisionally overthrow the powers of our techniques and hence they would disclose the opportunity for a different approach to the patient and to therapy.

If we consider the therapeutic setting as the *locus* in which the human being is stating his own way to be-in-the-world, can we operate a semiological clearing in ourselves for us to be able to consider the therapeutic relationship as the medium through which and for which the meaning of such world is disclosed as shared?

According to my experience, we can obtain such a *locus* whenever we are able to set a suspension (Epochè, Husserl 1913) on our worldview. Outwardly utopian, this stance is the essential and distinctive characteristic of a human being: it is our innate inclination to make sense of the world through our experience of us being situated in such a world with the others. As stated by Merleau-Ponty,

[...] when a child cannot speak, or cannot yet speak the adult's language, the linguistic ritual which unfolds around him has no hold on him, he is near us in the same way as is a spectator with a poor seat at the theatre; he sees clearly enough that we are laughing and gesticulating [...] but there is nothing at the end of those gestures or behind those words, nothing happens for him. Language takes on a meaning for the child when it establishes a situation for him'

(Merleau-Ponty, 1945)

During my experience as a psychologist for the schizophrenia intensive care unit (C.T.R.P) I faced these topics directly. At the time of my first debriefing with the operative group I was not informed about the specific diagnoses of the residential patients. Indeed, the person in charge (Doctor F. Sbraccia) gave me only the task – at first sight very vague – to observe and to pay keen attention to the dynamics of the relational distances between me and the patients. By my account, *distances* are firstly meant as a manner of being in the clinical relationship which considers the paramount importance of that *being-toward* the ‘other’ that at the same time it is also a certain *being-in-regards-to*. At the same time, this essential basis goes along with the necessity of putting ourselves as being-distinct from the other in the

clinical relationship i.e. neither a sort of sympathetic empathy nor or the coolness of the surgeon, but rather a different and strictly phenomenological way of thinking about distances that I will try to show. It is self-evident that setting effective relational distances involves a solid selfhood that can enable us put ourselves toward the other without losing boundaries. These borders are extremely important for us and for the other; using a metaphor, they could be thought of as an unobtrusive hedgerow. This image is effective as such a hedgerow may represent a hiding place or a shield against prying eyes while from both sides of this border someone (i.e. ourselves and the patient) can just peep out from behind, see through it or even cast some signal to someone that is on the other side. As a matter of fact, this idea of distance unavoidably wanders off from its practical meaning and hence approaches an idea of *psychotherapeutic setting* meant as a container whose permeability can be controlled. Metaphorically – and from both sides – the borders of this container can keep a secret, they can prevent a threat, be a defence from an unwanted relationship or welcome it. As a matter of fact these ‘porous’ borders will always set the conditions for a possible encounter and therefore for clinical relationship. This concept of distance opens up the possibility for the patient and the therapist to meet each other on a human-like level rather than merely falling into being-the-observer and being-the-observed.

The results obtained with our patients during my two years working in the C.T.R.P. had a ground breaking effect on my clinical practice. As matter of fact I experienced the difficulty of being-there with the Other in the way described above, the labour and the importance of withholding our judgement and our technique to allow the continuous dealing of meanings that is implied by the encounter of two intentional beings of consciousness in the world. This outcropping phenomenon appeared to us as being the *a priori* condition for an authentic encounter; metaphorically, it seemed like the *basso continuo* of the encounter meant as a melody we are playing together in the here and now.

‘Roaming’: a phenomenological principle

In the daily working experience of a mental health department it is common to feel like it is almost impossible to get in touch with some of the patients and sometimes like we are hardly seen by them. It feels like there is a sort of gap that cannot be filled, a gap that I believe is set by the enigmatic sense of sufferance itself. Considering my first year of experience at the C.T.R.P. of Salzano, there were two important elements that played an important and positive role for my clinical work. The first was the very fact of receiving very little information about my observational tasks (as described above) and hence very little information about *how* I was supposed to stay and interact with the patients. The second, and perhaps the most

important, was that I did not know the patients' diagnoses and therefore I was forced to be in harness with them, I was keen and committed to understanding the meaning-for-me and the meaning-for-the-other of every relational exchange that was happening: those interactions were the only and most valuable piece of information about the patients. It was a very difficult and tough job. I often felt submerged by doubts, nothing was really clear and structured but there was one obvious and important certainty: *I was properly listening, I was properly observing*. Being in this receptive stance made me sometimes confused and even disoriented within the physical space of the department – sometimes it even felt as if I had never had a proper place in those living-rooms and corridors. Soon after applying myself in these difficult observational tasks I noticed that my insecure and respectful wandering was having a significant effect on the residents: gradually I noticed that they were starting to move around me with a sort of new and never-before seen self-awareness. I did not need to look for them in the morning because they were now starting to get closer to me themselves and I started to feel myself welcomed as their *guest* and not endured as a clinician and therefore as an outsider. This being-a-guest was a very special experience, I wasn't a patient and yet I was a doctor, in some way I started to be seen as a sort of pilgrim or as temporary guest. This specific background of the therapeutic encounter started to be the texture of every interaction and it was the direct result of a style, an attitude that I called *erranza* (roaming).

This name aims to remark that the pathway to the world lived in by the suffering psyche is a dangerous walk. In a metaphor, rather than looking for a well-beaten path across the forest, rather than making account of the solid and safe structure of our clinical instruments and techniques, if we really want to gain access to these worlds we must be ready to get lost in the woods. Through this metaphor I tried to underline the importance of keeping a careful 'passivity' and doubtfulness but at the same time an active process through which we bracket our clinical training to let that inherent *openness* emerge which is ontologically concerned with our human nature. *Roaming* is indeed the way of someone who leaves the known and the familiar and that in this case has decided to approach the dark the path where sufferance lives and where the only clear voice is the one of the *tacit cogito*: of the existence itself. According to Merleau-Ponty the tacit cogito represents a primitive and pre-reflective self-consciousness which is simultaneous with our consciousness of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1945). According to the French philosopher, the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* fails to grasp *such a* primary subjectivity which has indeed to be found on the inner and pre-reflective level of the *tacit cogito*: the level of consciousness which precedes and conditions the emergence of language as such and that always presents itself as a silent and inarticulate grasp of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1945). In Minkowski's words this *grasp of the world* is seen as a

movement toward which defines and grounds the human existence in its elemental tension and at the same time attraction toward the world. Rather than being a mere spatial movement it is a natural phenomenon, an inherent human attitude which grounds the emergence of the experience itself. Following Bergson (1889), Minowski conceives his '*élan vital*' ('vital projection/leap') as the original movement toward that which turns the whole chaotic becoming of the world into experience and therefore meaning: this very engagement, this movement toward the world represents the rising of the transcendental life of Ego (1968). According to Minkowski, this *movement toward* is nothing more than the merging of Ego's *affirmation* (meant as the grasping of the world as meaningful) with the *realisation of the project* (meant as the achievement of the endeavour) that is both *belonging to* and *unfolding from* that primary grasp/contact with the world. Thus, these two elements ground that quid, that vital element that enables the man to harmoniously sail (make sense of) the chaotic on-going waves of the becoming and turning them into experience. This very relationship between the man and the becoming is called by Minkowski *lived synchronism* (Minkowski 1968). Metaphorically, this synchronism is a continuous flowing to and flowing back from the Ego to the 'becoming environment', a continuous dialogue between the self and the world.

Using Minkowski's words, working with the psychological sufferance is like entering lands that exist only as a result of an ultimate and desperate deed, places where the *élan vital* is broken and has no other way of living, no other world-view appears to be possible. Applying the 'roaming' stance I felt the primitive angst toward not understanding, an anxiety which is essentially equivalent to the effort of a new-born baby to build a world of sense and meaning when that chaotic jam of sounds, colours and smells presents itself. That 'roaming' was indeed a difficult exercise involving a personal unbalancing toward a state of mind that is similar to the one that we might experience when staring at an abstract painting. An abstract painting is often the representation or the expression of the very private experience of the painter and therefore it could be rather inscrutable if not obscure; nonetheless we stare, we observe, we listen carefully to our feelings and we wait for the painting to communicate, we struggle to keep ourselves open and ready to receive any kind of signal.

Day by day, while I was applying this challenging approach I saw the environment changing; the rooms, the pharmacy, the garden and even the walls were different. The smell of the food was awaited around 11 am, the music playing from the living room was then Giuseppe's favourite CD, the beautiful music played at the piano was Daniele's passionate studies of Beethoven, the ball of wool abandoned on the sofa was Linda's spool for her crochet and so on. Everything was starting to be richer and was starting to share history with me. I was struggling to inhabit those places

as they have been always completely unknown to me; every effort was made to see everything in the way it was for who was already living there before me. Thus, the *meaning* – and therefore the being – of those objects and events was something rising and unfolding to me thanks to such a movement of interior suspension (*Epoché*). The ‘roaming’ was becoming unavoidable and essential for me to seek a chance to be-there-with-someone and therefore, for me to share a world of meanings. If we return to my metaphor, the act of walking and wandering in those unknown woods was like delving in the shadows of the forest; it was like walking far from the safety of a beaten track. Nevertheless, rather than looking for someone to find, it was actually like *walking light on my feet* with the awareness that many people were sheltered by the forest. I was aware that this place was the wood of the silent *logos* of the unspeakable sufferance but I also knew that

To wonder about the most inner psychotic experiences means also to put ourselves in a paradox, means to put ourselves between the unspeakable and the effort to listen. This paradox has his highest effects with the autistic patient and tests the ability to hold and to listen in the clinical setting. Indeed, the autistic patient could be seen as a living man broadcasting a message to someone but rather than pretending to say something, he is struggling to find a place where that signal would have been recognised as such[...]

(Muscatello & Scudellari 2000, my translation).

The ‘roaming’ then grounds the encounter with the Other meant as the being-in-act of shared experiences and unfolds the opportunity for a phenomenon that Husserl called *appresentation* – *i.e.* our appresentative grasp of the other. Here I cannot explain extensively this concept, but I can say that according to Husserl we can grasp our similarity with the *alter* because of its relation to the world and to us; that is to say that in the encounter with the other we recognise our essential similarity with respect to a meaningful world that is itself result of our constitutive and jointed activity.

As stated above, the application of the ‘roaming’ stance put me in an unorthodox position as I was experienced by the patients a sort of inside-outside figure. One of my reports states that I felt as though I was in transition between being a psychologist and being a *guest*. Guest comes from the Latin word *Hòspitem*, composed by *Hòstis* – which means foreigner, pilgrim – and *pes* = *pets* which is an adjective referred to the householder – *Pets* has its Latin root in *pa-* which indicates the act of supporting and protecting. Interestingly, pilgrims or wanderers were supposed to move through foreign lands and therefore to have experience of very different environments and cultures. For this reason, they were used to walking on

light feet for fear of disturbing the peace of any *unknown* and potentially dangerous environment. On the other hand, the inhabitants of such *unknown* places knew everything about their place and hence they had enough confidence on their land to choose whether encounter the pilgrim or not and hence to decide whether to host him or not. *Hospitem* is indeed a very interesting parallel with the phenomenological stance I am proposing here, and shows how the power balance in the clinical relationship could be cautiously overturned. Indeed, if our intervention would ever represent a healing hand outstretched in the darkness, that hand would certainly be there to be grabbed as an offer rather than moving around seeking someone to grab. If we try to approach the world lived in by suffering psyche, can we enable ourselves to follow a suffering man's lead rather than trying to force him on our own? *Roaming* is the effort to act a suspension, to offer ourselves a chance to see something different and therefore to gain that primary contact with others' sufferance that is the base for any further therapeutic approach. During my experience, I didn't know what to look for and hence, rather than seeking I was staying aside trying to observe and to understand what was happening.

With regards to this clinical and roaming stance: a wanderer should move in the shadow and act out an intimate and respectful silence which is again *suspension* and *modesty*. Dante wrote that '*Modesty is a shrinking, a drawing-back of the mind from unseemly things, with the fear of falling into them, [...] how many errors does it bridle in?*' (Dante, 1307). I believe that we can think of modesty as a metaphor for a private act of weakening with the awareness that – as clearly stated by Risser in his essay in honour of Gianni Vattimo – 'weak thought' is not a weakness of thinking in which philosophy is no longer able to give directions to the concerns of *life*; rather, it is simply the way in which philosophy takes into account the transformation of its role whereby it takes up a thought of the weakening of the weight of *objective* structures and, ultimately, the weakening of *being* itself (Risser, 2007). This weakening is hence '[...]a movement of thought's withdrawal from things and events able to give access to a "shadow zone" which remains anyway invisible and ineffable, a zone of renunciation of the claims traditional philosophy advanced to be able to grasp his objects' (Rovatti, 1992).

Conclusions

According to the speculations and observations above, the theme of distances is a central issue in the daily work of someone who approaches severe psychological sufferance. The phenomenological stance described in this work produced significant results in our clinical experience and specifically it has been noticed as being very effective in the establishing of strong therapeutic alliances and preventing drop-out during treatment. In our

clinical observations it has been noticed that this stance is a powerful model to ground the harnessing work with difficult psychotic and schizophrenic patients in controlled environments. It is doubtless that the anthropological matters stated in this work have to be considered case by case and specifically as regard to patients' subjectivity and department/institute characteristics. Nevertheless, the stance of 'erranza' (roaming) is indeed an attempt to propose a method to set up the right conditions for any patient observation/intervention, specifically in controlled environments. This method involves hermeneutic principles that have been shown to be of primary importance when we delve in the complex and maieutic work of psychotherapy.

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Of Cocaine And Scaffold Bars: A Critique of *The Myth of Mental Illness* By Thomas S Szasz

Christina Richards

Abstract

The Myth of Mental Illness remains a seminal text within psychiatry, psychology and psychotherapy. Fifty-four years on from first publication, Szasz' contentions concerning 'mental illness' are examined in light of current understandings and research. It is suggested that there can indeed be 'mental illness' but that this may nonetheless lead to compassionate practice.

Key words

Mental illness; Neurology; Szasz; Anti-psychiatry; Hysteria; Conversion disorders.

Thomas Szasz's *The Myth of Mental Illness* is a seminal work in the field of critical mental health and anti-psychiatry which, fifty-four years after publication, continues to have implications for the practice of therapy, psychology and psychiatry, as well as for non-clinical readers in ethics, Mad Pride, survivor movements and beyond. With its emphasis on individual choice and responsibility within a social network, as opposed to discrete disease entities, it fits well within the existential canon alongside works by others who were similarly critical of the positivist models of mental difficulties such as Laing (1969) and Foulkes (1984). However, Szasz not only challenged the social situation of mental distress or 'problems in living' in terms of treatment, he maintained that mental distress was necessarily a matter of mind (in a social context) and not of brain or biology. His views were first published as a paper in *American Psychologist* in 1960¹, and were later expanded and released in book form in America in 1961 and in the UK in 1962. His views are, of course, founded in the time he wrote them, during the last gasp of the hospital system prior to the large closures of the 1980s, and prior to brain scanning and modern psychopharmacology. Of course great strides have been made in neuroscience since 1960 and so this paper, while not engaging more generally with the field of critical mental health and the place of *The Myth of Mental Illness* within it, seeks to revisit Szasz' contentions in light of some of these findings and to see whether, in this twenty-first century light, we can still say that a biologically based 'Mental Illness' is indeed a myth.

‘Mental Illness’

Szasz’ fundamental contention in *The Myth of Mental Illness* is that the term ‘mental illness’ is an oxymoron and that the experiences which are usually covered under this term are better explained as a ‘problem in living’ (Szasz, 1974: p 185²). This is on the basis that the word ‘mental’ pertains to the ‘mind’, as distinct from the physical brain, whereas - in contrast – ‘illness’ pertains to a derangement of physical tissue. Hence his assertion that ‘mental illness’ is a nonsensical term best understood as a metaphor:

Strictly speaking then, disease or illness can affect only the body. Hence, there can be no such thing as mental illness. The term ‘mental illness’ is a metaphor.

(p ix)

He goes on to state that:

Mental illness is a myth. Psychiatrists are not concerned with mental illnesses and their treatments. In actual practice they deal with personal, social and ethical problems in living.

(p 262)

Of course, this is Cartesian dualism – the separation of the body (including the brain) and the (socially situated) mind, which is something I shall address below in light of current neuroanatomical understandings, and is perhaps contrary to some existential understandings which consider body and mind to be fundamentally intertwined (e.g. Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1945]).

However, Szasz goes further asserting that the proper place of a physician is not to treat ‘economic, moral, racial, religious or political ills’ (p ix) and thus that the situation of ‘problems in living’ lies, at least in part, outside of the individual’s socially situated mind. Therefore ‘problems in living’ are not within the remit of a physician who is trained to ‘diagnose and treat disorders of the human body’ (ibid); unless he explicitly chooses to engage in this manner – and then for Szasz he is not a true physician. Instead of psychopathology being a matter of a derangement of physical tissue Szasz asserts that it should:

...be conceived in terms of sign using, rule-following, and game playing, and [psychotherapy should be practiced] in terms of human relationships and social arrangements promoting certain types of learning and values

(p 263)

Thus ‘mental illnesses’ are a result of games (in the special sense of what

we now might consider to be Game Theory³) consisting of signs and rule following. These games are at odds with society at large in the case of psychosis and at odds with the self in the case of neurosis (ibid p.267). We shall examine these ‘games’ further below.

Unfortunately, while Szasz situates social conflict as being inimical to mental health for many people, in *The Myth of Mental Illness* he does not address the need for social change as means of amelioration of mental difficulties, whether diagnosed as psychosis or neurosis, in the way the more recent literature has done (e.g. Johnstone, 2000; Laurance, 2003) and instead focuses on the individual with reference to conversion disorders using the, even then, outmoded term ‘hysteria’.

Hysteria

The misogynist term *hysteria* has Greek routes, referring as it does to the *hysteria* – the uterus in modern speech. It was originally assumed that only women could suffer from a conversion of their mental distress into the form of bodily illnesses, and consequently hysteria was named after the body part thought peculiar to females (Showalter, 1985). However, even in the first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-1 - APA, 1952), which was published eight years before *The Myth of Mental Illness*, the term hysteria was considered to be outdated and was replaced with the term ‘conversion disorder’ (APA, 1952: pp 107-108).

Szasz’ use of hysteria throughout *The Myth of Mental Illness* is perhaps somewhat disingenuous. It is trivial to assert that a person with a conversion disorder has nothing physically wrong with them, and that (if we accept Szasz’ assertion regarding the term ‘mental illness’ above) they therefore do not have a mental illness – it is a *diagnostic criterion* that they have nothing physically wrong with them. Szasz therefore must be correct when he suggests that the symptomology therefore fulfils a communicative purpose only:

I submit that hysteria - meaning communication by means of complaints about the body and bodily signs - constitutes a special form of sign using behaviour.

(p 145)

But crucially, this is only applicable to the diagnosis of conversion disorder – as we shall see. Consequently, his arguments regarding conscious and unconscious game playing detailed below do follow, but his conflation of hysteria with all psychiatric diagnoses as in the sentence following does not:

It follows that what we call ‘hysteria’ or ‘mental illness’ can be

properly understood only in context of a specified social setting.

(p 200)

In contrast, the *DSM-I* has amongst its diagnoses a whole section of ‘Chronic Brain Syndromes’ associated with such things as: syphilis, intoxication, drug or poison intoxication, brain operation, irradiational brain trauma, arteriosclerosis, etc. (pp. 3-4) which are clearly mental illnesses, even in Szaszian terms, as the link between mental processes and brain dysfunction is incontrovertible. Within the current *DSM* – the *DSM 5* (APA, 2013) Conversion Disorder, also referred to as Functional Neurological Symptom Disorder is listed on page 318 under code 300.11 and states that: ‘Clinical findings provide evidence of incompatibility between the symptom and recognized neurological or medical conditions’, whereas Cocaine Use Disorder is listed on page 562 under code 304.20. It seems that then, as now, psychiatry does indeed include physical illnesses that affect the mind, as well as those that do not have such a clear causal link with neural tissue dysfunction. Further, some diagnoses appear to have both a physical and a psychic component, especially the syndrome or constellation-based diagnoses such as Schizophrenia (Bentall, 2003) and Depression (Wolpert, 2006).

Mind, brain and world

Perhaps due to the technologically limited understandings at the time, Szasz has little to say about biological arguments concerning mental illness, limiting himself to one short paragraph:

I submit that the concept of a distinctively human, normal or well-functioning personality is rooted in psychosocial and ethical criteria. It is not biologically given, nor are biological determinants especially significant for it. I do not deny of course that man is an animal with genetically determined biological equipment which sets the upper and lower limits within which he must function...Hence I eschew biological considerations as explanations.

(p 209)

However I argue that with regards to interactions between the mind, the [biological] brain and the world, it is not possible to conceptualise them discretely and to dissociate routes of action. Much cognition is distributed cognition, in which brain processes are offloaded onto the environment, for example in the making of a shopping list or the operation of a computer (Clarke, 1997). And much social action is epistemic action in which external events are manipulated to alter an internal state as with trans people’s early expressions of gender where gender confirming or non-

confirming behaviours are exhibited or suppressed depending on life circumstance (Richards, 2010a, 2011). This epistemic action may result in neuroplastic adaptation (subject to some genetic predisposition) – for example experimenter induced pup retrieval behaviours in mice results in adaptations to the BSTc in mice brains (Ehret, Jürgens & Koch, 1993). Interestingly, the same nucleus is implicated in primary transsexualism (Chung, De Vries & Swaab, 2002; Kruijver, 2004; Zhou et al., 1995) suggesting a possible epistemic epigenetic aetiology in this condition.

This biological-social aetiology has grave implications for Szasz' notion of a Cartesian dualistic split obviating the concept of mental illness – social illness is, in a very real sense, brain illness and vice versa. There are various other vectors for society and brain to interact: Work stress and serotonin; poverty and nutrition; risky sex and syphilis; education and language acquisition, and so on. I contend, therefore, that Szasz' assertion regarding mental illness does all people who receive diagnoses something of a disservice. Consequently, whether or not a 'problem in living' has its *primary* roots in brain physiology there is necessarily a manifest need for that person to address how that are 'in the world' – their Worlding if you will (cf. Spinelli, 2007).

In addition, even if medical models of psychopathology are utilised, the diathesis–stress model (which suggests that a genetic and subsequent phenotypic predisposition to an illness can be triggered by stressors) would mean that if world-based distress can be ameliorated then attenuation (and neuroplastic adaptation) will take place which may also ameliorate the neurological insult – howsoever caused (Bentall, 2003).

Psychoanalysis

Perhaps the primary difficulty with *The Myth of Mental Illness*, aside from it's conflation of hysteria with mental illness, is that it conflates psychoanalysis with psychiatry and pays little attention to other approaches – something which was perhaps wilful in the first edition in 1961, unusual at the height of behaviourism at the time of the second edition in (Shorter, 1997) – and is simply incorrect today. It does, however, make sense in buttressing Szasz' arguments, as psychoanalysis is perhaps the most introspective of the therapies; one which hopes for external change to be derived from an adjustment to the analysand's internal world, rather than making adjustments to the external world, or their place in it as a part of the therapy. Notwithstanding the distributed cognition arguments above, it is easy to suggest in relation to the psychoanalytic standpoint that the hysteric in analysis has nothing particularly wrong with them and that the psychiatrist is colluding with the patient's notion of being 'sick' for their own ends, even when the patient consents. Indeed Szasz states that:

I submit that... most of what now passes for 'medical ethics' is nothing but a set of paternalistic rules whose aim is to diminish the patient while aggrandizing the physician.

(p 176)

However, it's harder to assert that the psychiatrist who is devising a rehabilitation programme for a person who had had a scaffold pole fall through their head is doing the same thing.

Nonetheless Szasz asserts that mental illnesses are not biologically derived; that psychoanalysts (or all mental health professionals) should not treat them as if they are; and that they should not be regarded as discrete illnesses, but rather as 'happenings' (p 222) which serve a social communicative purpose. Szasz asserts that these are constituted by Game Playing including communication via Signs and Rule Following. It is to these that we now turn.

Game Playing

Szasz' notion of game playing fits with game theory and intersects with Transactional Analysis (TA, Berne, 1968), although Szasz does not mention TA specifically in his book. Within this model games are not regarded as pastimes, but as social strategies which consequently have a moral component. Indeed Szasz states that: 'Human behavior is fundamentally moral behavior'. (p 263) meaning that: 'Psychiatric operations are a species of social action – and hence ultimately a species of moral action' (p 259).

As with secondary gains from hysteria detailed above, these 'moral' game strategies often prove useful, and once learned in infancy may become ingrained as a way of interacting with the world. Consequently Szasz states that:

Psychiatric theories ought to recognise the moral choices inherent in psychiatric symptoms and syndromes, and psychiatric therapies ought to view the game playing habits of patients more as habits that patients want to keep than as happenings they want to lose.

(p 222)

Following this he asserts that, therefore, the medical model does not address this social-communicative notion of mental distress and the intent, conscious or otherwise, of the patient-as-player. And so:

Accounts of therapeutic interventions with so called mental patients and modifications should be couched in the language of changes in the patient's game orientations rather than in the

language of symptoms and cures

(p 229)

Szasz, writing in the 1950s, suggests that two games which give rise to hysterical habits are religion and family. Within the family game one wishes to care for the weaker members – and therefore the hysteric can position themselves as the one who is cared for. Within the religious game the players are injunctioned to care for weaker members, with the same result, thus:

[The religious and family games] provide much of the historical basis and continuing rationale for the strategies of so-called hysterical behavior as well as for those of many other mental illnesses. In short men and women learn how to be mentally ill by following the rules of these two games.

(pp 162-163)

I might suggest that the state benefit system has superseded the religious game in this regards. Within all of these games the following of the rules, and the placement of the players as the patient and the therapist or carer, results in a predictable outcome – that of help for the ‘ill’ person and a sense of accomplishment for the therapist or carer. Thus, although Szasz’ notion of mental illness being an oxymoron is questionable as a universal, there is clearly still contemporary merit in the wider notion of the communication of distress throughout his work.

Szasz, however, seems to have no truck with this communication being understandable, perhaps because, for him, it forms the totality of mental illness. Instead he follows aspects of Sartre (2003 [1958]) in suggesting that we are condemned to be free despite our game playing intentions, stating that:

I would insist that, to some extent at least, all people do shape their own destinies, no matter how much they might bewail the superior forces of alien wills and powers.

(p 155)

This means that in taking on these roles of carer and patient it can be argued that both parties are acting in bad faith by eschewing their freedom. We can see this in Szasz’ statement that:

So called mental illnesses are best conceptualized as special instances of impersonation.

(p 237)

In Szaszian terms this implies someone impersonating a person with a physical illness, but which might be better construed as someone fulfilling a sick role and thereby ‘impersonating’ a [physically] sick person. Although Szasz does not only include people with ‘mental illnesses’ in this bad faith group:

The world is full of people who act ‘as if’ they were someone else.

(p 234)

And acknowledges that:

In desperation, [many people] long for the security of stability – even if it stability can be purchased only at the cost of personal enslavement.

(p 265)

Szasz suggests that the reason the ‘hysteric’ takes on the sick role is because:

The hysteric plays at being sick because he is afraid that, if he tried to participate competently in certain real-life activities, he would fail. At the same time, by adopting this strategy, the hysteric invites and assures his own defeat.

(p 221)

Thus, although the sick role abrogates a degree of responsibility, and with it one set of problems in living, the sick role itself positions the patient socially such that there is another set of problems in living. We can often see this in many contemporary Western societies wherein care can only be gained through being ‘sick’, and indeed sick enough that resources (be they time off, money, physical support etc.) are allocated. Thus even the person with a scaffold bar neural insult – the antithesis of Szasz’ hysteric – must perform ‘sickness’ if they are to get help. But what may be done about people acting in this sick role? Or for those people for whom the term ‘mental illness’ might indeed be an oxymoron – those people with problems in living that are not based in biology in any way and are impersonating those people with biological illness? It is to this final question I now turn.

A modern conceptualisation of ‘mental illness’

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider fully the field of critical mental health, or to investigate the social changes which may be useful in allowing people to self-care; and indeed to care for others who are in

distress outside of the illness model. Any changes in this regard would need to recognise the complex intersections of the social, biological and psychological touched upon above. I shall, however, briefly consider whether an alternative model of mental illness might be arrived at which both includes the biological and the communicative aspects of mental distress. A crucial aspect of this is, I believe, to consider the impact of continuing to have, fifty years after the publication of *The Myth of Mental Illness*, a class of people who are considered to be 'well' (psychotherapists) and a class who are 'unwell' (patients).

Szasz suggests an alternative role for both groups and therefore an alternative paradigm in which to work:

Although ostensibly he [the patient] is requesting and receiving help, what is called 'help' might be forthcoming only if he accepts the patient role and all that it may imply for his therapist. The principal alternative to this dilemma lies, as I have suggested before, in abolishing the categories of ill and healthy behavior, and the prerequisite of mental sickness for so-called psychotherapy. This implies candid recognition that we 'treat' people by psychoanalysis or psychotherapy not because they are sick but, first, because they desire this type of assistance; second, because they have problems in living for which they seek mastery through understanding of the kinds of games which they, and those around them, have been in the habit of playing; and third, because, as psychotherapists, we want and are able to participate in their 'education,' this being our professional role.

(p 248)

Thus Szasz cuts through his own Gordian knot and abolishes mental illness as a prerequisite for psychotherapy. In dissolving the illness dichotomy between therapist and patient an egalitarian accord is reached in pursuit of a common goal (c.f. Richards, 2010b), rather than the deficit reduction model that is generally practiced. Szasz goes on to state that:

The concept of mental illness also undermines the principle of personal responsibility, the ground on which all free political institutions rest. For the individual, the notion of mental illness precludes an inquiring attitude towards his conflicts which his 'symptoms' at once conceal and reveal. For a society, it precludes regarding individuals as responsible persons and invites, instead, treating them as irresponsible patients.

(p 262)

Consequently, for Szasz, personal responsibility for how one acts in the

social world into which they are thrown⁴ (Heidegger, 2008 [1962]) is paramount. Crucially, however, he does not say how one could determine whether they had the capacity to be responsible, for example in the case of acquired brain injury. As seen above it is not possible to disentangle illness vectors satisfactorily. Assuming total responsibility of the ‘worried well’ patient in private psychoanalysis is quite different from assuming total responsibility in a person with disinhibition after a frontal lobe insult from a scaffold bar.

His argument does, however, invite a kinder I-Thou⁵ style of relating (Buber, 1958):

Genuine improvement in medical, and especially psychiatric, care requires the liberation and full enfranchisement of the patient – a change that can be accomplished only at the cost of full commitment to the ethic of autonomy and reciprocity. This means that all persons – whether sick or wicked, bad or mad – must be treated with dignity and respect.

(p 176)

But this seems rather limiting, positing as it does dignity and respect simply as a result of autonomy. There is little dignity and respect when one has assaulted one’s loved ones due to being granted the autonomy to check out from hospital with an acquired brain injury.

Thus Szasz’ contention that:

In the individualistic, autonomous ‘Psychotherapy’ which I prefer the patient himself defines what is good or bad, sick or healthy.’

(p 228)

seems perhaps less respectful of the dignity of the individual than that of a system which acts in a benevolent way (albeit with the attendant difficulties if that benevolence is put aside as in the case of recent care home scandals in the UK – BBC News, 2013). Szasz thus appears to take a strong view of total responsibility as a necessary consequence of the abolition of mental illness. He asserts that, because of this responsibility, psychiatric patients should be treated as equally responsible to their therapists and carers, and should not therefore be involuntarily incarcerated, but should be able to have assistance with their problems in living by mutual consent.

In contrast, however, we might imagine a mental illness which allows for the provision of services, including the deprivation of liberty when necessary, but which is founded on dignity and respect as necessary to that function, rather than only adjunctive to it – a truly intersubjective understanding

of mental illness, which allows for both the biopsychosocial aetiology, as well as its communicative function.

In his attack on psychiatry and [lack of] responsibility Szasz does acknowledge the diversity of ethical standpoints which might include such a stance (cf. Woolfe, Dryden & Strawbridge, 2003), but this was not integrated into his theory of personal conduct within *The Myth of Mental Illness*:

The ethical values embodied in, and enforced by, contemporary psychiatry – so called general psychiatry – are too numerous and diverse to be encompassed in a brief discussion or to permit any kind of easy generalization.

(p 256)

This then is perhaps the best message to be taken away, that psychiatry, psychology and psychotherapy are diverse. That there are many and varied types of mental illnesses, from the ‘hysteric’ communicating a problem in living to the coked up, disinhibited person with a frontal lobe injury (who is also endeavouring to communicate their distress). In addition it needs to be recognised that, while there is a biopsychosocial aetiology for many mental illnesses, it should nonetheless be recognised that this does not lead to the client being in any way lesser than the therapist, irrespective of the social function of their actions and howsoever derived; and that, in 2013 just as in 1960, care is seldom well coupled with bad faith roles or unconsidered power.

Postscript

Thomas Stephen Szasz sadly passed away on September 8th 2012. He was a compassionate physician and a towering academic. That a book half a century old still excites criticism is testament to his work. In writing this critique I mean no disrespect to his memory, but rather seek to honour it through robust engagement with his thoughts and ideas. I like to think he would have liked that; indeed I very much hope so, as he has proved an inspiration in the development of many aspects of my thinking and practice. The customary authorial thanks are therefore, of course, to Thomas Szasz himself.

Notes

¹ A free copy of which may be found at: <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Szasz/myth.htm>

² All page numbers and references to Szasz refer to this second edition of the *Myth of Mental Illness* unless otherwise stated.

³ Game Theory is an ‘attempt to mathematically capture behaviour in *strategic situations*, in which an individual’s success in making choices

depends on the choices of others' (Wikipedia, 2013)

⁴ Although Szasz does not use the term 'thrown'.

⁵ Although, again, he does not use the term 'I-Thou'

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Creative Inspiration and Existential Coaching

Sasha van Deurzen-Smith

Abstract

This article is an overview of the experience of creative inspiration and the philosophical issues present. Potential applications for existential coaching are proposed with a view to allowing greater engagement with this key aspect of creative life which is often overlooked in modern life

Keywords

Inspiration, Coaching, Existential Philosophy, Creativity, Art

Don't loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a club, and if you don't get it you will nonetheless get something that looks remarkably like it.

Jack London

1. Introduction

Inspiration is a term which many seem confident using in conversation, but when asked to define the word, or even to describe the act of being inspired, it can be difficult to come up with something which accurately summarises the experience.

Through both my experiences with my clients and my own personal involvement with the creative process, I began to realise that while inspiration is theoretically accepted as a part of that process, in practice its significance tends to be, in my view, underestimated. I noticed that my clients tended to refer only to inspiration as a moment already experienced, a trigger point for them to begin a project, but that seemed to lose its impact once the work had begun. And yet, if asked to describe the moment of inspiration – after some hesitation – there came a passionate and rich response. It was as if they could embrace the experience at the very beginning of a project, but that the power it held could not be revisited and was almost shameful to them. It was a moment of vulnerability that served its purpose and was swiftly buried under the toil which is also imperative for creative work.

The stories of these artists were often prefaced with phrases like 'this is going to sound really stupid' and accompanied by a sudden loss of eye-contact in an otherwise engaged session. Often, it was only after some

gentle encouragement that these clients were able to engage fully with the memory and to communicate the powerful impact it had had at the time. While there is very little in existential philosophical texts that specifically refers to inspiration or even creativity, broader existential themes such as freedom, authenticity and responsibility are certainly relevant, and I am interested in how an existential coach might work with these themes in order to encourage greater engagement with inspiration.

It is important to note that there are many accounts of artists who specifically deemphasise the importance of inspiration. Anthony Burgess (1990) and Chuck Close (2008), for example, wrote that inspiration was for amateurs, and that hard work was the only way to move forward creatively. This is not an uncommon view, and perhaps reflects the bias in the literature towards training creative skills rather than training the ability to allow oneself to become inspired. The fact remains though, that there are many artists who would disagree with this, and the reality is that both inspiration and hard work have their value in the creative process. My particular concern is not that hard work is held in such high esteem – this is perfectly agreeable to me – but that inspiration is comparatively neglected, despite the power that it appears to hold for many people.

I have broken this paper into four sections based on the four worlds model as developed by Binswanger (1963) with later additions by van Deurzen (1988). This model illustrates the four dimensions of existence which human beings are confronted with: Umwelt (the physical dimension); Mitwelt (the social dimension); Eigenwelt (the personal dimension); and Uberwelt (the spiritual dimension).

Umwelt

In 2012, Blick Art Materials (Mommymaestra, 2013), a company which stocks art supplies issued a survey on inspiration targeted to 500 people self-identifying as artists either by trade or hobby. The top ranked source of overall inspiration was identified as the outdoors. This may be related to psychological distance but also hints at what Maslow (1994 [1970]) termed ‘peak experience’, a transpersonal state which is often associated with being in nature. Maslow’s concept of the peak experience contrasts with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) theory of ‘flow’, which is a description of a mental state of complete absorption in a task. The two can occur at once, but a peak experience does not necessarily mean that someone is in flow. While flow is certainly experienced by artists who have encountered inspiration, it does not account for the experience itself, only the possible outcome. A peak experience, whilst not always being a moment of inspiration, is closer to the catalytic nature of that inspirational ‘Aha’ moment.

It would be an oversimplification to take physical environment as it stands and not examine the importance of the meaning that we individually

place on it, just as the four worlds model supports connectivity between all four dimensions of existence. The physical cannot simply be the physical with no link to personal, social and spiritual experience. Charlotte Macgregor (2013) notes in her qualitative study of transformational experiences in nature that participants described a wide variety of impacts ranging from improved social relationships to a feeling of connectedness to a greater whole.

This holistic experience illustrates not only how the four dimensions interact with one another, but highlights the significance of working with the artist on all levels, to create this sense of harmony which seems to be related to transformative experiences and therefore possibly inspiration. The overarching issue here is that environment is undoubtedly linked to creativity and to our ability to engage with the act of being creatively inspired. This means that special care should be taken to ensure that the environment one works in is conducive to this engagement. That could mean altering certain properties of the area, creating a different atmosphere. It could mean finding an alternative environment altogether. It ideally means taking care to assess how the artist is currently engaging with that environment and how they are making meaning in it so that any action taken is informed by this knowledge of one's subjective experience.

Perhaps the most significant, yet under-recognised aspect of our physical existence is our mortality. We are all united by the inevitability of our eventual deaths and yet we are usually in a state of denial about this. Existential literature is rife with theories about our attitude towards death and there is a perhaps surprising link between creativity and death.

Heidegger (1962) wrote that in order to live authentically, we must face our being-towards-death. That is to say we must accept our own mortality instead of viewing death as something that happens to other people but never ourselves. In this sense, we might talk about authentic creativity: creativity or inspiration that stems from our own awareness of our mortality. Confrontation with our finiteness can be an inspiration.

Rollo May (1978) writes about the link between creativity and death in *The Courage to Create*, stating that the creative act is about establishing some way in which we can become immortal. We may perish, but our creation will ultimately live on. This is essentially about using creativity to ensure that we are not reduced to nothingness in our death.

Engagement with inspiration requires one to be comfortable with nothingness and uncertainty. There is nothingness to begin with, and it is in that space that we create. But in order to create we must at once accept the existence of that nothingness and see it as a call to action. We must confront the anxiety of the uncertainty that lies ahead of us by recognising the full range of possibility. Stephen Sondheim summarised this feeling in the final line of his 1984 musical *Sunday in the Park with George*, concerning the life of artist George Seurat, 'White: a blank page or canvas.'

His favourite. So many possibilities.’

On a neurological level, there is a link between inspiration and sleep, specifically hypnagogia, the transitional state between waking and sleeping. Salvador Dali was a great believer in the power of the hypnagogic state and gained the majority of his inspiration from utilising it. Bernard Ewell (Dali Park West Gallery, 2009) describes Dali’s method in his essay *Provenance is Everything* describing how the artist would sit with a mixing bowl on his lap and a large spoon in hand. He would wait to fall asleep, at which point the spoon would hit the bowl waking him. This routine would continue on a loop until he felt inspired by his imagination which would run rampant in such hypnagogic states. On a neurological level, this experience is thought to be caused by the inhibition of the neocortex which results in more primitive brain structures taking over (Mavromatis, 1987). The inspiration may then essentially be a result of inhibitions being removed, allowing us to engage with our imagination in a more primitive, non-judgemental manner. This would also explain why many artists use alcohol or drugs to assist the creative process, and raises an issue of how we might be able to train ourselves to adopt such attitudes in different ways.

Mitwelt

In terms of relatedness involving the artist herself, inspiration can be gained from others both competitively and appreciatively.

The competitive element could be compared to the link made earlier between inspiration and nothingness. An example of this would be a writer who reads another author’s work and thinks ‘I can do better than that’. They have noted a lack in the other writer’s work, and a potentiality in themselves.

The appreciative element is the opposite of the competitive one. An example of this would be a songwriter going to see concerts and being inspired by another composer’s sound, which offers something that they have not yet experimented with themselves. They are thus inspired by a combination of a ‘something’ in another person and a historical lack in their own work.

Since both of these offer inspiration, it is important for an artist to be aware of others’ work and to tune into their own sense of lack or potentiality. Let us look at the philosophical implications of both of these mindsets, to see how they might apply to the client in any given situation.

The competitive attitude is best examined in the works of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Nietzsche (2003 [1885]) spoke of conformity as a herd mentality, and encouraged his readers to find their own sense of morality and culture by reassessing their values in order to become what he called the Superman. Similarly, Kierkegaard (1941) favoured individualism, stating that the ‘crowd is untruth’ and therefore the majority is not always right. This seems particularly relevant when looking at cultural trends. A

preference for one particular style of music, clothing or any other artistic product will take cultural precedence, and by tapping into this philosophical mindset, an artist can be encouraged to take inspiration from rejecting these ideas and finding their own, unique creation. This is not always easy. Heidegger (1962) theorised that we are in a frequent state of inauthenticity, having been thrown into the world which we share with others. He terms this ‘fallenness’, and emphasises that we are essentially defined by the Other before we are defined by ourselves. It is therefore difficult to find our own perspective. This is extremely relevant creatively, as we are, too, thrown into a world of other peoples’ artistic creations, and are undoubtedly influenced by this.

As Bohm (1998) notes in *On Creativity*, a fundamentalist non-conformist paradoxically ends up conforming very strictly to her own ideals, and is thus ultimately a conformist herself. Bohm argues that this is not true creativity. Whilst this point is debateable, it does speak of a need for balance.

The appreciative mindset can be illustrated by the work of Levinas (1979), who asserted that the Other has priority over the self. He also contradicted the trend in existential philosophy for self-centric thought. This does not mean that we sacrifice our individualism, but that the Other is held in higher regard. In this sense, we might look at the work of the Other as having priority over our own, thus gaining inspiration from what the Other has contributed to the world.

Self-consciousness is widely considered an inhibitor of creativity and might affect the artist in the process. For example, an artist in the throes of inspiration is working on her project. She feels a sense of excitement and personal connectedness to her work. At some point, she is likely to face the inevitability of having to share this work with another. This realisation changes her relationship with her creation. Suddenly, it is not just something that she is creating on her own terms, it is something that she must create with an audience in mind. This does not necessarily mean that the content of the creation will change, though in many cases this will occur, but it means that her sense of relation to the project itself will evolve. This is essentially an illustration of what Sartre (1990 [1943]) called ‘The Look of the Other’. The concept of ‘The Look’ describes how when one is conscious of another person’s gaze, there comes a realisation that they have been made into an object by the onlooker. In this encounter, the artist becomes the object to the audience’s subject. The meaning that the artist has expressed within her work is suddenly no longer in her control and is open to interpretation by the audience. Sartre explains that this conflict between object and subject results in a power struggle in which beings will either embrace their objectification or try to exercise dominion over others. In the case of a creative project, this becomes increasingly difficult, because the finished project is the initial object of judgement and not the

artist herself. Despite this, the artist may still experience ‘The Look’ if the project is seen as an extension of herself.

The desire of the artist to become an object-in-itself can be strong. She wants to be defined as a great artist rather than accepting her holistic sense of self as a changing, unfixed being-for-itself. The notion of herself as a great artist is both compelling and limiting. If she focuses on this outcome of her work she is in Bad Faith, having convinced herself that she is, or is striving to become a fixed object.

My personal solution to this problem is in my conceptualisation of my role in the creating. Since inspiration is about taking in, I see this starting point as the Universe acting as subject to my object. I take in its message. At that point, I become subject, and I begin the job of communicating this message to others. Once this is done, there remains a connection between myself and my creation but we are not one and the same. The audience becomes subject to the creation’s object and by extension myself. Because the creation is the result of my sense of connectedness to some greater whole, this objectification of the audience is not solely directed at me. The result is a holistic engagement between universe, self, other and creation. This shows the importance of factoring in the act of being inspired, as it brings with it a sense of connectedness to something external, rather than one’s creative project being a solely personal endeavour.

Of course, this is just one way of grappling with the problem of The Other, and the goal in coaching would be to uncover a conceptualisation that works for that particular client. What is important is an awareness of the various issues at hand, and an ability to engage with the problem in a philosophical way with the aim of revealing the client’s own philosophical truth.

Eigenwelt

This is the dimension which pertains to the vast majority of literature on the topic of creativity, and this focus on the self is likely to reflect our recent social and cultural climate. While I agree that our personal management of emotion, self-talk and sense of meaning are all important aspects of creativity, these tend to be discussed in the context of self-mastery and do not offer much sense of their connectedness to something wider than just the self.

Existential perspectives on the self vary considerably. Sartre (1990 [1943]) believed that we are not initially aware of a sense of self, and that we are ultimately a project at that point. It is only as we begin to reflect on our being that we begin to establish a concept of selfhood. Nietzsche (2003 [1885]) argued that we only become ourselves through acts of will. There are of course many other existential concepts of the self, but the common thread throughout is the notion that the self is fluid, and is essentially something defined by our relationship with ourselves (and others), rather than a fixed state.

In my research into artists' accounts of their own creative process, and particularly their own sense of being inspired, a specific word, 'soul', seems to be commonly mentioned. After careful consideration, I came to the conclusion that the use of the word 'soul' is about one's relationship with oneself. It is our own personal sense of what moves us, quite apart from how we subsequently translate this into action. It may be experienced in a profoundly spiritual way, particularly when confronted with an experience that suddenly and surprisingly focuses our attention on that core sense. For example, visiting a foreign land where one inexplicably feels touched and somehow 'at home' despite never before having been there. This might inspire a feeling of connection to the world, or, for some, even a sense of a possible past life, but it is ultimately reliant on one's sense of 'at-homeness' within that situation. My sense of the word is about a strong sense of self on a very intimate level. It might be stirred by our environment, other people or a connection to something greater, but it is not created by them and is always located within our sense of self.

It might seem to be counterintuitive that one could speak existentially of the soul, as it is popularly associated with a belief in a God and the afterlife. Perhaps we might see it as a human creation developed to escape from our own mortality into some everlasting piece of ourselves. But the word is still used in existential philosophy, and in fact is particularly favoured by Nietzsche despite his famous declaration that God is dead (2003 [1885]). Nietzsche (1998 [1886]) wrote that the soul is a combination of our drives and social structure, rather than a physical or religious aspect of our being. The notion of the soul being made of our drives does account for the intensity of the experience of having it stirred, suggesting that we are in contact with something that is deeply motivating to us. This is especially true when we take into account the breadth of Nietzsche's philosophy which is largely about individualism and the need to develop one's own ideology. If we take these two ideas together, perhaps Nietzsche's notion of the soul is more about individuality and the subjectivity of what drives us in life. But there is something about this which still seems oversimplified and does not account for the actual experience of having the soul stirred. It is a somewhat objective idea about the subjective nature of the soul, rather than an assertion that inspiration or creativity in a more general sense might stem from one's soul being stirred. Put more simply, inspiration might emerge from one's heightened sense of self.

Having personally explored the notion of the soul in quite a creative way, I can see a place for this within the coaching relationship. If an artist is to gain a clear sense of self, then the notion of the soul (or however they choose to name it) is a fantastic resource. It goes beyond idiosyncrasy, personality, history and meaning to an essence that seems to encompass all of these at once and more. The notion of the soul can be used to introduce

a deeper exploration of self, and creative media can be introduced into this process. For example, the client might be asked to try to draw a representation of their soul, bring in a piece of music that they feel touches something within them in a very primal way, or identify favourite poems, films or books. An exploration of this can be led by the coach with a view to uncovering what is at the heart of the emotional connection that the client seems to share with the piece of art in question.

Uberwelt

In ancient civilizations, inspiration was believed to be an external force, often associated with a God or spirit. The ancient Greeks called on the Muses to put them into a *furor poeticus*, a state of madness where the Muse's thoughts replaced those of the individual. Likewise, in Old Norse culture, inspiration was given by a deity and seemed outside of the control of the subject. The Romans, similarly, spoke of a personal daemon called a genius who would imbue its owner with insight and inspiration. While these concepts have fallen out of fashion, it is interesting to note how much of our current language is owed to such concepts (Music from *Muse*, Genius from the *Roman daemon*). The concept of art as a sort of divine inspiration was summarised by Plato (1951 [380 BC]) in his *Symposium* where he theorises that through such inspiration the artist manages to create something that is truer than the objective reality. This raises a very interesting point from an existential perspective, as it posits that the subjective experience of living carries more truth and intrigue than the objective one. Interestingly, Plato (2000 [380 BC]) also posed what is often viewed as an opposite view in *The Republic*, in which he states that art is merely imitation and is therefore always further and further from the truth. This trend for the divine, external source of inspiration continued into the Renaissance, and was even expanded upon by Pontus de Tyard who claimed to have identified four different types of divine inspiration.

Whilst some of this thought continued with artists such as Coleridge and Yeats, the focus became more and more towards an internal locus of influence. Freud (1958 [1908]) famously wrote that inspiration was located in the subconscious mind and was born out of unresolved psychological trauma or conflict usually stemming from childhood. This theory very firmly placed inspiration at the hands of the artist rather than a God or spirit. Jung (2011 [1912]), similarly, spoke of genius within a person, as a sort of trait that they could possess in contrast with the Roman concept of genius as a visitation or spirit quite separate to one's self. It is also noteworthy that skills such as automatic writing and keeping a dream diary are now linked to this internal idea of inspiration and seen as coming from the subconscious, whereas they could just as easily be seen as some sort of channelling of an external influence, were we

culturally attuned to this way of thinking.

There are clear cultural implications of this shift in thinking. It seems likely that it is linked to the steady decline in religion and other faith-based practices in Western culture as well as the general preference for cognitive and neuro-linguistic approaches to psychology. But I believe there is another major cultural issue attached to this change, and that is the digital revolution and other aspects of the new Information Age. With computer technology and new media very much at the forefront of our cultural evolution there is a focus on verbal communication. This has been streamlined further and further with the trend for social networking which habituates particularly limited exchanges in which messages are often capped by a character restriction. This means that we have come to focus very much on verbal descriptions of experience, which need to be pithy and clear in order to facilitate communication. We are well-practised in setting up personal profiles on websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, expertly selecting what we reveal to the world about ourselves. The result of this is that we have become rooted in our *Mitwelt* and *Eigenwelt*, able to communicate with each other, and about ourselves, in a verbally efficient and thought-out manner. Unfortunately, there is a lack in this connectedness, which not only tends to exclude or at least subordinate the physical and spiritual dimensions, it also takes us away from non-verbal aspects of experience. Our reliance on language is reflected in the current literature where free-writing, neuro-linguistic programming and self-talk are all highlighted as key issues and the notion of inspiration is largely overlooked.

Another implication of the focus on internal influence in inspiration is that of the responsibility of the artist. Author Elizabeth Gilbert outlines this in her TED talk (Ted, 2009) entitled *Your Elusive Creative Genius*, in which she compares and contrasts how the artist relates to her own sense of responsibility based on a notion of internal or external inspiration. She observes that with an external focus, the responsibility is placed on the deity, daemon or other source of inspiration. With an internal focus, the artist becomes responsible for any success or failure and therefore the stakes are higher. This sense of responsibility causes anxiety and dread and is probably often the source of writer's block and procrastination in artists, as well as more extreme examples of suicide and self-harm. Gilbert encourages her audience to consider that they 'have' a genius rather than that they must 'be' a genius.

There is clearly scope for the existential coach to highlight issues of responsibility and freedom, and specifically to explore how letting go of some of that sense of responsibility might allow the artist to experience greater a incidence of inspiration. Additionally, a sense of freedom could be explored in the coaching relationship in order to practice letting go, and inviting something external in. By focussing on creating a balance between freedom and responsibility, the artist might be encouraged to open

up to the experience of being inspired when it occurs, while still occupying herself with creative pursuits in the meantime due to her sense of responsibility to her craft.

I am reminded at this point of those artists whom I mentioned in the introduction, who have adopted a disparaging view of inspiration, stating that it is for amateurs or that, 'If there's one thing that's dangerous for an artist, it's precisely this question of total freedom, waiting for inspiration and all the rest of it.' (Fellini, 2003). Perhaps the reason for such denial of the transcendent qualities of inspiration is because it is often seen as a denial of responsibility. It is taken to either extreme: total freedom where the muse must strike or else no work is done and the artist holds no role other than that of a vessel, or total responsibility where the artist must master herself and own her genius regardless of the potential for narcissism or self-destructive anxiety. Both extremes are unhelpful, unrealistic and unbalanced. There is a gentle tug-of-war to be created between freedom and responsibility within the artist. There is a beauty and a utility in allowing oneself to be inspired, to take in something of the universe that cannot be explained, quantified or owned. There is also a necessity and meaningful self-actualisation in exercising one's creative muscles and mastering the mind in order to allow greater productivity. In unison, this could be extremely powerful, bringing an attitude of creation that is both transcendent and self-affirming, both ephemeral and industrious, both free and responsible.

Conclusion

For an existential coach working with the four worlds model, it is essential to remember that the client will be more used to working within certain dimensions, and will find it harder to work within the less examined ones. There is great value in learning to observe which worlds the client is comfortable in, and using this as a starting point to enable the relationship to develop before plunging them into something less familiar. Likewise, there is a skill in moving fluidly from dimension to dimension which not only aids the work, but in turn teaches the client to do the same and therefore to access awareness and engagement with their less frequently examined areas.

Since the current cultural focus tends to be on cognitive, self-directed action, it is hard to give something like inspiration breathing room, and hence it is usually ignored altogether. By placing inspiration at the forefront of our minds, there is great value to be found through focussing on our sense of connectedness to the world, rather than taking an approach of isolation and solipsistic individualism.

However, perhaps the most important point is that without awareness of its significance, we are unlikely to invite it in or reap the benefits of inspiration in the first place.

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A Phenomenological Analysis of Existential Conscience in James Ivory's (1993) *The Remains of the Day*

George Berguno

Abstract

This paper introduces a new idea into existential psychology through three successive critical readings. First, the author presents an existential critique of the psychoanalytic notions of the superego and conscience. Second, the author gives a Platonic reading of Martin Buber's conception of existential guilt. Finally, the concept of existential conscience is introduced and illustrated through a phenomenological analysis of James Ivory's (1993) award-winning film, *The Remains of the Day*

Keywords

Superego, Conscience, Identification, Existential Guilt, Existential Conscience.

Introducing Existential Conscience

The idea that I am about to describe was first presented at a clinical workshop at the Royal Society of Medicine on November 24, 2012. The workshop, entitled *Exploring Existential Conscience in Therapeutic Practice*, was subsequently presented again on June 29, 2013. On both those occasions, I focused on the therapeutic applications of psychoanalytic and existential conceptions of guilt. However, in this paper I will set myself the more modest task of introducing only one original idea: the concept of existential conscience.

My manner of presentation will be as follows. To begin with, I will present Sigmund Freud's concept of the superego, and explain why it cannot be equated with conscience. To do this, I will draw on a neglected masterpiece of psychoanalytic literature. I am referring to Eli Sagan's (1988) *Freud, Women and Morality: the Psychology of Good and Evil*. I will then deepen my critique of psychoanalysis by delving into Martin Buber's distinction between guilt feelings and existential guilt. But I will also be critiquing and extending Buber's ideas using a distinctly Platonic approach. Finally, I will illustrate my concept of existential conscience through the unusual hermeneutic strategy of presenting a story in which this unique form of conscience is distinctly absent. The story in question is James Ivory's (1993) beautiful film rendition of Kazuo Ishiguro's (1989) novel, *The Remains of the Day*.

The Superego and Identification with the Aggressor

Sigmund Freud first introduced the concept of the superego in 1923 in a work entitled *The Ego and the Id*. In that work Freud described the superego as a psychological structure which develops around the age of three through the internalisation of the parental interpretations of cultural norms. One very interesting aspect of Freud's theory is that, to begin with, Freud believed that the superego represented what was best and highest about human beings. In support of this idea, he argued that the superego represents the capacity to observe and evaluate ourselves. The superego also contains a cognitive representation of our potential; a phenomenon which Freud referred to as the ego-ideal. But Freud also believed that the superego functions as a sense of conscience. In other words: the superego dictates what is right and wrong, how we should and should not behave, and what we could aspire to become.

However, seven years later, in 1930, in a book entitled *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud revised his early views on the superego. In this later work, Freud reported that he had discovered that morality contained a large component of destructiveness and irrational sadism. The superego, according to Freud's new theory, can be ruthlessly hyper-moral. It can torture us, humiliate us, ridicule us, and make us feel unworthy. Therefore it would be a mistake, says Freud, to believe that the superego stands in a moral relation to the ego. Freud's theoretical turnaround is, of course, remarkable and very interesting. But in order to understand how and why he changed his mind we must examine his views on the superego as summarised in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, published in 1933.

According to the *New Introductory Lectures*, the superego develops primarily through identification; through the desire to be like someone else. In psychoanalytic theory, identification is considered a form of attachment. However, Freud clarifies in Lecture 31 ('The Dissection of the Psychological Personality') that the superego evolves out of an attachment with a person who makes us feel uncomfortable. We identify, for example, with a person who expresses anger, or makes us feel angry; a person who is hostile, or arouses hostility or resentment in us. But why would we identify with someone who makes us feel uncomfortable? Why not identify with someone who loves us and treats us kindly? Freud's answer to this question, as presented in 1933, is that identification is a way of coming to terms with the uncomfortable feelings that are evoked in us. It is a way of taking control of an emotionally difficult situation.

Freud's views on the role of identification in the development of the superego were investigated further by his daughter Anna Freud in 1936, in a book entitled *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*. In that classic work of psychoanalytic theory, Anna Freud referred to the above phenomenon as the identification with the aggressor. Moreover, she argued that the

process of identifying, at a young age, with someone who makes us feel uncomfortable accounts for the punitive qualities of the superego. Unfortunately, what Anna Freud's theory cannot account for is the development of a healthy conscience, defined as the capacity to make realistic appraisals of one's responsibilities towards others. Admittedly, Sigmund Freud was aware of this theoretical lacuna, and, in an effort to overcome this problem he suggested, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, that perhaps conscience emerges out of the ego's interaction with the ego-ideal. But, as clinicians since Freud have come to agree, the ego-ideal can also be a source of suffering; especially if the image of our perfected self is inflated and unrealistic. We must conclude then, that classical psychoanalysis failed to provide us with a convincing theory of the development of conscience.

Eli Sagan and Identification with the Nurturer

Ever since Freud presented his more pessimistic views on the role of the superego in the emotional life of human beings, psychoanalysts have sought to describe and explain how we come to care for others. Melanie Klein's (1957) concept of the depressive position, for example, with its emphasis on concern for others, is one such attempt at revision. But perhaps the most innovative critique of the Freudian theory of the superego was put forward by Eli Sagan (1988) in a book entitled *Freud, Women and Morality: the Psychology of Good and Evil*. The principal thesis of Sagan's book is that conscience has its own developmental trajectory, independent of the superego. Moreover, Sagan argues that conscience must appear early in life, or we would never go against the superego. This last statement is particularly enlightening, because it implies that one characteristic of conscience is the ability to override the rules and norms by which we have been living.

Though Sagan agrees with the Freudian view that the superego emerges out of identification with the aggressor, he believes that conscience is grounded in the infant's love for and identification with the nurturer. Moreover, says Sagan, identification with the person who loves us and treats us kindly is essential for our psychological well-being, because it is the only way to combat destructive impulses. This becomes evident when we express kindness to a person who is vulnerable or who has been victimized. When we come face-to-face with a human being who is in an unfortunate situation, we may respond in one of three ways. Firstly, we could withdraw from the victim because she is perceived as a loser, and we do not want to be associated with such a person. Secondly, we could take advantage of the other's helplessness, manipulating her to our advantage. Or, thirdly, we could empathize with the victim's pain and suffering, and offer our compassion. This third option, says Sagan, is the only one which can transform our aggression and destructive impulses into a

capacity to be a comforter:

What is so powerful in the mechanism of identification with the victim is that it transforms an identification with the aggressor into an identification with the nurturer.

(Sagan, 1988: p 180)

Now, I believe that Eli Sagan's idea that conscience has its own developmental roots is immensely important, and that his book is an underrated classic of psychoanalysis. If Sagan were correct that identification with the aggressor can be transformed into identification with the nurturer, then we have a powerful therapeutic tool for transforming the severe guilt generated by the superego into a creative emotional experience. However, to evaluate both the Freudian and Saganian views on conscience, it becomes necessary at this point in our investigation to provide a critique of the psychoanalytic ideas presented thus far. My critique will be primarily philosophical, thus paving the way for an existential model of the emergence of conscience and ethical action.

Critique of the Psychoanalytic Ideas on Conscience

The first point to note regarding the psychoanalytic ideas described thus far is that they focus on a limited network of relationships; in particular, they focus on face-to-face relations with caregivers. But the social world is not restricted to face-to-face relations. We also forge important links with contemporaries; with persons that we have not met and perhaps may never meet. Equally, we may have important relations with predecessors (persons who died before we were born). Moreover, we can act in a way that affirms our successors; I'm referring to those persons who will live on after our death and who we perhaps may never know. But the Freudian and Saganian theories of conscience ignore these wider social spheres.

Psychoanalytic theories of conscience tend to focus on the moral dilemmas of our early years; but the moral dilemmas we encounter as adults are significantly more complex than those we face as children. To take this critique further, neither Freud nor Sagan refers to the world in the existential sense of the word, as the place where we suffer and where we belong. Their theories are not grounded in historicity; and yet, the lived experience of history is crucial to a developing sense of conscience. Finally, I would argue that conscience emerges out of an encounter with limit situations such as death and impermanence. So, though human conscience may begin in the nuclear world of the family and in the early experiences of love and nurturance, it gains in depth through significant existential insights: the world I live in is a shared world; I suffer and so do others; what others do or have done affects me; I grow old and so do others; I die; others die.

I believe that psychoanalytic investigations into the development of conscience are very important. But an existential model of conscience must encompass an understanding of the human condition. If the Saganian psychoanalytic model of conscience were correct, then it would suffice for a therapist to act in an empathic manner to awaken a sense of conscience in the client. An existential model, in contrast, would suggest that conscience emerges out of a very particular encounter with the world. In the history of philosophy, there have been thinkers who conceived conscience as a particular relation to the world and to others. Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, and Simone de Beauvoir, for example, have all contributed to the debate. But the philosopher I will focus on is Martin Buber; partly because he focused on guilt in relation to others; and partly because he introduced a distinction into existential philosophy which acts as a counterpoint to psychoanalytic theory. I'm referring to Martin Buber's distinction between guilt feelings and existential guilt.

Martin Buber on Guilt and Guilt Feelings

Martin Buber published his essay 'Guilt and Guilt Feelings' in a book entitled *The Knowledge of Man* in 1965; a book which represents his mature philosophical anthropology. In this work Buber makes a distinction between guilt feelings, which are subjective experiences within a person; and existential guilt, which he describes as an interhuman phenomenon. The term 'interhuman' does not refer to the social world; nor does it encompass the interpersonal. Buber uses the term to refer to an ontological dimension which is the source of authentic dialogue. Existential guilt, says Buber, does not reside within the human psyche; it is found *between* persons. To be precise, existential guilt resides in the failure to respond to the ethical call of the world. Moreover, it is a guilt that one takes upon oneself in recognition of this failure. In this respect, it represents a unique responsibility. Therefore, it cannot be equated with the demands of the superego; neither does it refer to compliance with societal norms. Indeed, Buber's definition of existential guilt is very specific:

Existential guilt occurs when someone injures an order of the human world whose foundations he knows and recognizes as those of his own existence and of all common human existence.

(Buber, 1988: p 117)

As the true significance of Buber's definition is easy to overlook, I would like to offer the following point of clarification. Existential practitioners often use the phrase 'existential guilt' to refer to a person's failure to fulfil his or her potentialities. But what Buber is describing is much more specific. Existential guilt, in Buber's ontology, is not just a failure to realize one's

potentialities. It is the failure at a particular moment in time to bring one's potentialities into play when responding to the ethical call of the world. I invite the reader to imagine a unique individual in a unique historical situation. If the reader can also imagine that that person has been called upon to respond to the situation with a unique ethical act, then the reader has grasped the true import of Martin Buber's existential guilt.

Existential Conscience as Unique, Compassionate Action

Since Martin Buber conceives existential guilt as a responsibility one takes upon oneself in relation to the world, it would be interesting to explore the link between guilt and conscience and freedom. Plato wrote in his dialogue *Phaedo* that, in order to understand a particular phenomenon, we must identify the most excellent expression of that phenomenon. So what is the most excellent expression of our freedom? Simone de Beauvoir's (1976) unequivocal answer, as proposed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, is to protect, preserve and nurture the freedom of others. But Buber's notion of existential guilt is remarkably similar to de Beauvoir's conception of freedom. If we were to ask Buber what, in his opinion, would be the most excellent expression of conscience, I believe he would answer: the guilt one takes upon oneself in relation to another. But here I would like to raise a critical question: is it possible to refine Buber's notion of existential guilt? My answer to this question is yes, especially if we focus on Buber's phrase: 'when one injures an order of the human world.'

Buber's phrase, quoted above, implies there may have been a time when one had not, as yet, injured the world of the interhuman; it implies there may have been a time when one was free of existential guilt. But existential philosophy posits that suffering and conflict are universal, ever-present, and inevitable. One could say, then, that the order of the human world is perpetually wounded. Assuming this is an accurate description of the human condition, I may ask: what am I to do in the face of this eternal injury to the human order? Or, if I may rephrase the question: given that I am a unique individual in a unique historical situation, what then is my unique compassionate response going to be? In my view, a unique compassionate response to the eternal injury of the human world constitutes the most excellent expression of conscience. I call this phenomenon *existential conscience*; and I conceive this idea as an extension, or, if you will, a critical refinement of Martin Buber's notion of existential guilt.

Here I would like to make my idea as precise as possible; and I will do this by quoting from the paper I presented at the clinical workshops described above:

Existential conscience is the guilt one takes upon oneself when one vows to repair the human order of the Between through unique, compassionate action; an order which has always been

injured and is always in the process of being injured; an order which is perceived primarily through the realisation of shared embodied vulnerabilities.

(Berguno, 2012)

I am, of course, using the phrase 'the Between' interchangeably with Buber's term 'interhuman.' And now I would like to illustrate my very specific notion of existential conscience through a phenomenological analysis of James Ivory's (1993) remarkable film, *The Remains of the Day*. My hermeneutic strategy, in this instance, will be Socratic, for *The Remains of the Day* is the story of a man who faces an extraordinary, unique, historical test; but who fails to respond to the ethical call of the world.

A Phenomenological Analysis of *The Remains of the Day*

The Remains of the Day tells the story of Mr Stevens, a butler who serves Lord Darlington in the years leading up to the Second World War. Lord Darlington is an immensely wealthy and influential English gentleman who fought in World War One. However, he is a man consumed by guilt feelings. As Lord Darlington explains to his butler, the terms imposed on Germany by the victors of the First War were so harsh that Germany plunged into economic recession. As a result, one of Darlington's German friends was unable to find work after the war. The friend ultimately lost hope of ever finding economic security in post-war Germany; he shot himself in a railway carriage between Hamburg and Berlin. From that day forth, Darlington decides that he will use his influence to assist Germany in her economic recovery; even if that requires that he support the Nazis.

The Remains of the Day is not an easy film to summarize, partly because it does not have a plot. Instead, we are presented with a series of episodes which gradually reveal Mr Stevens' feelings for the three most important persons in his life. Indeed, one could say that the film has a tripartite structure. The first part of the film chronicles Mr Stevens' ambivalent feelings towards his father, who had once been a butler but is now relegated to the role of under-butler at Darlington Hall. Mr Stevens' admiration for his father blinds him to the fact that Mr Stevens Senior is old, even for the role of under-butler. Indeed, the first part of the film focuses on the older man's physical decline and eventual death. The third part of the film, in contrast, examines Mr Stevens' gradual realization that he is in love with the housekeeper, Miss Kenton. Miss Kenton reciprocates his love, but, as Mr Stevens fails to express his growing love for her, she accepts the marriage proposal of another servant, Mr Benn, and leaves Darlington Hall.

Most film critics have focused on Mr Stevens' tragic love for Miss Kenton. But in my view, the kernel of the story is to be found in the middle section of the film, which tells of Mr Stevens' unquestioned admiration

for his employer. A psychoanalytic reading of this portion of the story would be that Mr Stevens identifies with Lord Darlington, and secretly aspires to be like him. There are, indeed, many scenes which support this interpretation. One evening, Mr Stevens confides his philosophy of life to Mr Benn. A man cannot call himself happy, says Mr Stevens, unless he has done everything in his power to serve his employer. Mr Stevens is quick to add that, of course, one must assume that one's employer is a superior being, both intellectually and morally. In a later scene, Mr Stevens travels west, driving a car that once belonged to Lord Darlington. When the car breaks down, Mr Stevens seeks help in a village pub. But his manners, his attire, his accent and the beautiful car deceive the villagers into thinking he is a wealthy man. In truth, he misleads the villagers into believing that he had once been an influential figure in politics 'in an unofficial capacity.'

I am not going to dispute the psychoanalytic reading described above; but I am going to argue that it is Mr Stevens' unquestioned admiration for Lord Darlington that, in part, restricts his capacity for ethical action. Stated in non-technical language, Mr Stevens disowns his responsibility towards the suffering of others by imbuing Lord Darlington with perfected qualities. So, when Lord Darlington decides to fire two young female servants because they are Jews, Mr Stevens accepts his employer's decision in the belief that Lord Darlington 'has studied the nature of Jewry.' Mr Stevens continues to ignore Lord Darlington's increasing involvement with the Nazis, until the situation reaches grave proportions. One evening, while Darlington is secretly meeting the British Prime Minister and the German Ambassador, Mr Stevens is approached by Mr Cardinal, Lord Darlington's godson. Mr Cardinal, who is a journalist by profession, informs Mr Stevens that Lord Darlington is in the process of entering into a pact with the Nazis. Mr Cardinal speaks to Stevens as if they were friends, and tries to convince the butler that he must do all he can to prevent Darlington from making a grave mistake.

In the context of the present discussion on conscience, Mr Stevens' conversation with Mr Cardinal represents a very important moment. Suddenly, we are struck by the realisation that, though Mr Stevens is a humble servant, he has, potentially, a very important role to play in the political events that are unfolding across Europe. As Lord Darlington's butler, he holds the possibility of entering into ethical dialogue with his employer. In other words, this scene, more than any other, illustrates the potential for *existential conscience*. Mr Stevens, as a unique human being, encounters a unique historical situation that demands from him a unique, compassionate response. Mr Stevens, however, tells Mr Cardinal that it is not his place to intervene or question his employer's political judgement. I have already argued above that Mr Stevens' lack of ethical action can be explained partly by his unquestioned admiration for Lord Darlington. However, what I propose

to do now is to show that Mr Stevens' failure to heed the ethical call of the world goes much deeper than identification with his employer; and I will demonstrate this through phenomenological descriptions of Mr Stevens' relations to objects, time, others, history, and language.

What do we observe about Mr Stevens' relationship to objects? The immediate answer to this question seems to be that, apart from the clothes that he wears on a daily basis, he does not possess any objects. He is the custodian of another person's material universe. As the custodian of Lord Darlington's material world, it is his duty to ensure that objects are kept in their place, and that they remain free of dust. These two activities lend Darlington Hall the illusion of timelessness. (If one stumbled upon a place in the universe where objects never moved and dust never settled, one would have stumbled upon a timeless dimension). The illusion of timelessness is also achieved through the many routines of the other servants of the house; routines which Mr Stevens supervises with a critical eye. To deny time is to deny the human condition; but it also represents a denial of one's capacity for ethical action.

The link I have just made between Mr Stevens' attitude towards objects and his attitude towards time is well depicted in the scene where Miss Kenton points out to Mr Stevens that his father has misplaced the Chinaman. Up until then, Mr Stevens has been berating Miss Kenton for being unsure of what goes where. From an existential perspective, Mr Stevens' repeated demand on Miss Kenton that she keep objects in their place could be seen as a demand that she should fit in with, and support, his world-design (Binswanger, 1963). So when Miss Kenton informs him about the Chinaman, he ought to be pleased. After all, she is beginning to see the world in his way. But Mr Stevens is not at all pleased, because he is not prepared to accept that it is his father who has disrupted his world design. The father's mistake, therefore, announces the reality of time and old age; just as the father's illness will later announce the boundary situations of suffering and death.

Let us examine one more scene that illustrates Mr Stevens' world-design and his attitude towards material existence. The scene in question is the one where Mr Stevens has just broken a bottle of wine. As he comes out of the cellar, he hears Miss Kenton crying. What happens next is fascinating, and open to multiple interpretations. Mr Stevens enters Miss Kenton's room without knocking, walks up to her without making a sound, and berates her for not dusting the vase in the alcove. Earlier that evening, Miss Kenton had informed Mr Stevens that she had accepted Mr Benn's proposal of marriage. Thus, a psychological interpretation immediately comes to mind: Mr Stevens is venting his anger on Miss Kenton. But an existential view of the same scene would suggest that Mr Stevens is reminding Miss Kenton (in a pleading, child-like tone) of his project to construct a world without time; and a world without time must, inevitably, be a world without

friendship or love. Love and friendship are, of course, expressions of being-with-others; so let us examine Mr Stevens' relationships in greater detail.

What do we observe about Mr Stevens' relations with others? The most striking characteristic of Mr Stevens' relations with others is that all human contact is mediated via status. Either a person is above Mr Stevens in rank, or a person is below him; but Mr Stevens does not have friends or peers or lovers. This aspect of Mr Stevens' being-in-the-world becomes especially evident if we look at the way he uses language. Mr Stevens' conversations are limited to giving orders or receiving orders or clarifying orders. We could say that all of Mr Stevens' conversations are aimed at conveying inequality of rank; but we could just as well conclude that he strips language of the possibility of authentic discourse. In order to make this point clearer, let us put aside for the moment Mr Stevens' relations with the inhabitants of the house; and instead let us turn our attention to his relations with those who live in the world beyond the confines of Darlington Hall. I am referring to Mr Stevens' relations with his contemporaries, and thus to the world of unfolding historical events.

What do we observe about Mr Stevens' attitude towards the political and social events occurring in Europe in the 1930s? It is clear that Mr Stevens has no understanding of world events, because he is not interested in anything that occurs outside of Darlington Hall. Expressed in its most striking form, we could say that Mr Stevens has disowned all connection to the world; he has disowned all responsibility towards his contemporaries. He is content to accept Lord Darlington's perceptions and opinions of the world who, he claims, 'understands the wider issues.' Stated in existential language, Mr Stevens denies the boundary situation of historicity. He has no notion of history as a phenomenon to which he belongs and which in turn belongs to him. In brief then, we may conclude that Mr Stevens has constructed a very remarkable world-design that denies time, suffering, death, old age, love, friendship, history, and the possibility of authentic speech.

A psychoanalytic reading of Mr Stevens' predicament would suggest that it is his excessive use of identification (first with his father, later with Lord Darlington) that constricts his capacity for ethical action. The existential perspective that I am describing, however, suggests that it is precisely because Mr Stevens denies so much of the human condition that he is insensitive to the suffering of others and incognisant of his own pain. This point is well illustrated in the scene where Miss Kenton informs Mr Stevens that his father has just died. Mr Stevens reacts to this news with a perfunctory thank you, but he continues to work, and he allows Miss Kenton to close his father's eyes. A psychoanalytic interpretation of his conduct would be that he is defending against loss. But from an existential perspective, Mr Stevens' behaviour is consistent with his world-design.

Conscience as Belonging-in-the-World

We come now to the point in our argument where we must raise a very important question. How are we to construe, then, the connection between the psychoanalytic concepts of the superego and conscience; and the existential understanding of the human condition? In a bold attempt at reconciling psychoanalysis with phenomenology, Hans Loewald (1980), in an essay entitled *Superego and Time*, put forward the idea that the superego functions as a future ego. According to Loewald, the superego represents the future ego's demands, ideals, hopes, and concerns. Parental authority, as internalized in the agency of the superego, is therefore related to the child as the representative of a particular future. Freud's genius was to have pointed out: every time we identify with someone we are changed by the process of identification. But Loewald takes this idea further: every time we identify with someone, that person becomes the embodiment of a very particular future. What I would like to do is to take this idea even further, into the realm of existential psychology.

I would argue that identification is a paradoxical phenomenon. On the one hand, to identify with someone may result in the appropriation of a particular future. But identification may just as well involve a severe restriction of one's freedom-towards-others. There can be no doubt from James Ivory's (1993) film version of *The Remains of the Day* that Mr Stevens had, at an early age, identified with his father. From one perspective, one could say that the father provided a role model for his son; or that the father 'inspired' the son to take up the same profession. But one could just as convincingly argue that Mr Stevens' identification with his father constricted his future possibilities; that it initiated the process of constructing a world-design that blinded him to the suffering of others.

As an existential psychologist, I reject the notion of a psychic agency that tells me what I can and cannot do. An existential analysis of the phenomenon of the superego leads me to conclude that the superego is a process that I choose; and that identification is a process that I bring about. Thus, if I were to describe in phenomenological language the psychoanalytic concept of the *harsh* superego, I would say that it represents a restricted sense of future possibilities, and a restricted sense of freedom-towards-others. From an ethical perspective I would also add that a severe superego represents a restricted sense of belonging-in-the-world. Conscience, in contrast, involves openness to experience and openness to time; and, above all, sensitivity to the suffering of others.

The workshops which I led in November 2012 and June 2013 were dedicated to exploring the therapeutic advantages of distinguishing between the psychoanalytic and existential conceptions of guilt. But in the present paper I have focused on theory because I wanted to introduce a new idea into existential psychology: the concept of existential conscience. And I have

taken care to differentiate it from psychoanalytic notions of conscience; and from Martin Buber's description of existential guilt. I have described existential conscience as the most excellent form of conscience, and the most compassionate sense of belonging-in-the-world. In my view, it represents a person's most unique freedom-towards the eternal suffering of the human world.

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The Affirmation of Experience*

A contribution towards a science of social situations

Aaron Esterson

Phenomenology I take to be the study of experience. I am concerned with living experience, specifically with acting as a guide to those whose experience has become problematic to them. This practice I term existential phenomenological analysis. I contrast it with the practice of psychiatry. Psychiatry styles itself the study and treatment of diseases of the mind, and claims to be a branch of scientific medicine. In practice, it functions to negate experience, and to invalidate those whose patterns of experiencing and being fall outside a narrow range. I see the matter as follows.

Experience may be defined as whatever I come to know in and through participating in the world, including how I come to know what I know. It is thus wider than consciousness or what is now called psyche or mind. It is the indivisible unity of a person intentionally acting, and by acting I mean to do, to know that I do, and to know in some measure what I do when I do it. Thus, as the study of experience, phenomenology is the study of personal agency, and as such it is the study of the differentia of the human.

The primary field of personal agency is the relationships persons make with each other. The phenomenological investigation of personal agency is the study of persons in their relationships with one another in and through the examination of their experience. This is the method of understanding persons. We understand them through understanding their relationships, and we understand their relationships through understanding their experience.

Persons experience. The way they relate to each other and to the natural world is an expression of how they experience each other and that world. This can be formulated axiomatically as, behaviour is a function of experience.

The pattern of a person's relationships makes sense through elucidating the experience his behaviour expresses. Existential phenomenology studies the experience of persons in respect of their way of being in the world with others and with nature.

* **Note by Anthony Stadlen.** Aaron Esterson wrote this paper, dated December 1985, by invitation for the Symposium on Phenomenology and Psychiatry, subsequently renamed the Symposium on Psychiatry and Phenomenology, at the Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center of Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on 6–7 March 1986. But Esterson withdrew it within two weeks of submitting it. For an investigation and explanation of his withdrawal, see my postscript, 'Quintessential Phenomenology', after this paper in this Journal. I gave the paper its first public reading at Inner Circle Seminar No. 196 on 29 September 2013 at Durrants Hotel, London, for the 90th anniversary of Esterson's birth.

While behaviour is a function of experience, it is also true that experience is a function of behaviour. That is to say, there is a reciprocity between behaviour and experience.

Persons relate to other persons. They respond and their responses are a function of how they experience those others. Their experience of these others is a function of how the others act towards them. My experience of you is a function of how you act towards me. It is not necessarily an exact reflection. It may be an accurate perception, or it may be to a significant extent a function of an experience in phantasy unrecognized as such by me. Only empirical observation of your conduct towards me can reveal how much it is a function of that conduct. This requires direct observation of the relationship.

For instance, I may respond fearfully to a frown by you. My response may be excessive, or it may be justified. For you being the person you are may be expressing in that frown a hostile intent, but only knowledge of you through direct observation of your relationship with me can determine whether or not my response is excessive, whether it expresses an accurate perception or whether, for instance, it is significantly determined by phantasy. My frightened conduct is, thus, a function of my experience of you, and my experience of you is a function of your conduct towards me.

But, the experience of persons interacting is always an inter-experience, and so, we must consider your experience of the relationship. Your frown may, indeed, indicate hostility, but your hostility may be a function of your perceiving me as having betrayed your confidence, which, however, I may not experience myself as having done. Further, I may not realise that you see me as having done that, while you may or may not know that I do not see you as seeing me in this way. Unless our experience of each other is clarified a spiral of reciprocal fear, mistrust and misunderstanding will build up. Such clarification again requires direct observation of the relationship. This is the province of social phenomenology.

Social phenomenological analysis studies relationships directly. It does so primarily in and through the examination of the experience of all the relevant participants, including the participating observer. It examines the behaviour and experience of persons in relation to themselves, each other and the groups they comprise. It studies persons in their relevant social contexts, no matter how peculiar their behaviour and experience seem at first sight, and is concerned with the sense of their praxis, and that of their groups. In a microsocial situation it seeks to elucidate with the persons concerned the reciprocities between them and among them, and between them and their group, in and through elucidating the reciprocities between experience and action and between inter-experience and interaction.

Consequently, it suspends judgement on the rationality or otherwise of even bizarre-seeming behaviour and experience. Viewed in its relevant,

current microsocial context, even the most mad-seeming actions and experience may be found to be an intelligible and even a reasonable response to an unreasonable social situation.

This is in contrast with psychiatry. It, too, is concerned with people's behaviour and experience – primarily with conduct that deviates from the social norm, without being illegal, and with experience it sees as aberrant. But it assumes the peculiarities to be ipso facto irrational, and assumes the more peculiar they seem the more irrational they must be deemed. And if they seem peculiar and disturbing enough they are diagnosed grossly irrational and mad.

This judgement is, thus, made without viewing the other in his relevant interpersonal context. In effect he is extrapolated from his social situation and viewed in practical isolation, reinforcing the appearance of peculiarity and unintelligibility. And while social and interpersonal factors may be seen to be present these are regarded essentially as secondary, as precipitating and/or aggravating.

Furthermore, psychiatry compounds its primary assumption with a second. The presumed irrationality is assumed to indicate a disease of the mind, analogous to a disease of the body, that causes the other to experience and act in the way he does. He is, thus, stripped of his personal agency, his experience and actions are invalidated, and their appearance of lack of intelligibility reinforced and sealed. Social phenomenology breaks this seal.

Social phenomenological analysis is a method of sampling microsocial situations, such as the family, through interviews conducted according to certain principles. It is investigative and demystifying. Philosophically speaking, it is in the Socratic tradition of *elenchos* – of dialectical or conjoint personal inquiry and learning through the discovery of what the other, in some sense, knows already without realising it or being able to formulate it.

The Socratic method involves as a first step formulating and examining what has hitherto been taken for granted.

Consider the case of Rosie Lander. She was an attractive young woman of 30 with three admissions to mental hospital and an established diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. She was the fourth of six sisters ranging in age from 25 to 35.

Her father had died of a heart attack when she was 11, and her mother had to expand her business to support her family full-time. She arranged for her own widowed mother to move in with her to keep house and care for the children. Five years later the grandmother died suddenly. Six months after that Rose had a breakdown. She was 16 years old.

She was admitted to hospital where she was described as confused, incoherent, inaccessible, agitated and saying things like, 'writing on the wall', 'Jesus is the answer', 'Grandma, Grandma'. From time to time she

would burst into fits of simultaneous sobbing and laughing. During her stay she was said to be uncooperative and resistive, constantly screaming she was not ill. She was described as having violent outbursts and needing to be secluded in a padded room.

She was given deep insulin treatment and electroshocks. Over a period she settled down into a dull apathy with occasional outbursts of temper, but eventually she was said to be stable in mood, and after eleven months she was discharged as 'remitted without insight'.

She remained well according to the clinical record until she was 27, when she apparently had another breakdown. Once more she was said to be restless and agitated, noisy and inaccessible to questioning and deluded, claiming there was a plot and that she had been kidnapped. She was said to be aurally hallucinated, and to show affective-cognitive incongruence, crying and laughing together. Diagnosis was recurrence of paranoid schizophrenia.

Once more she was given electroshocks, and this time heavily tranquillised. During her stay she was said to be evasive without insight. She was described as gradually settling, and ten months after admission she was discharged, relieved.

On her third admission two years later the description was similar with further paranoid ideas noted, such as a claim that she was being poisoned. For the third time she was diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic.

Once more she was given tranquillisers, and also, what was described as psychotherapy. She was discharged six months later as remitted with little insight. Shortly after she was persuaded to see me by a young man who had contacted me, and who said he was her boy friend.

It is clear from these descriptions that whatever Rosie's problem might be, she and the psychiatrists were in disagreement about whether or not she was ill. When a psychiatrist makes an ascription of schizophrenia he acts as if there is present in the person a demonstrable internal dysfunction or disease that causes the person to experience and act in the apparently bizarre way he does. Yet, despite more than 70 years of research into the problem no one has demonstrated scientifically the presence of such a disease or dysfunction. By scientifically, I mean, a demonstration according to the criteria laid down by Virchow on which the whole of modern, scientific medicine is based, a branch of which psychiatry claims to be. Virchow's criterion was the presence of demonstrable histopathology later extended to pathophysiology. No disease of the cells, no disorder of function, no disease. These criteria have never been met with regard to what is called schizophrenia.

The view that there is a disease present that causes these people to experience and act in a disturbed and disturbing way has, therefore, at best only the scientific status of an hypothesis, while in practice it is merely an assumption. Since repeated interventions based on this assumption had failed with Rosie it was time to question it. Was she behaving as she did

because there was something inside her causing her to act so, or were her actions under her control? And if so, did she have reason enough to do as she did, or was she indeed deluded? And if she was deluded, did this necessarily mean she was suffering from a medical-type disease of the mind analogous to a disease of the body?

It is a long-held popular view that one can be driven crazy by the actions of others, yet curiously, psychiatry fails to recognise this possibility, or if it does in theory, it has no way of discovering it in practice. In assuming disturbed and disturbing conduct and experience are primarily the result of an inner dysfunction, psychiatry precludes itself from seeing social and interpersonal stresses as anything other than secondary and contributing. How might one question, therefore, the clinical assumption scientifically? Popper's dictum is relevant. A proposition to have the status of a scientific hypothesis must be formulated in a way that is falsifiable. We need certain concepts. There are three – praxis, process and social intelligibility.

Praxis means the actions of an agent, the intentional deeds of a doer, whether the agent is a person or a group of persons acting in concert. But the praxis of a group acting together may be of a complexity that itself generates events that are unexpected, unintended and even undesired by any of the participants in the interaction. For instance, the size of a football crowd generates an unwieldiness and a complexity that might cause someone to be crushed, though no one in the crowd intends it. This unintended happening may be termed process because it gives the appearance of mechanistic inevitability to the activities of the group. We speak, for instance, of the bureaucratic machine. And, though the events generated cannot be attributed to the intentions of any particular person or persons, if what happens can be traced back to the pattern of interpersonal action showing the event to be the outcome of this, the happening becomes thereby socially intelligible.

The question to be asked, therefore, was, 'Is Rosie's peculiar behaviour and experience as unintelligible socially as the psychiatrists who made the diagnosis of schizophrenia assumed?' If their proposition is disproved the view that she is suffering a disease of the mind becomes redundant and irrelevant (on the principle of economy of hypotheses) and her real problem would have a chance to come into view.

In addressing this question two issues have to be considered: the method to be used, and the general principles informing the conduct of the study.

The general principles first. Hitherto the attitude of those dealing with Rosie had been based on a presumption of illness. This is a particular kind of bias that evokes a certain type of behaviour from the patient; and it affects how those with the bias see him, and how they evaluate what they see. As Szasz has pointed out the presumption of illness by institutional psychiatry results in a method of approach that formally resembles the inquisitorial legal process typical of the police state, and developed historically

by the medieval church against deviants such as Jews, heretics, witches etc. This results in institutional psychiatry functioning in our society as a means of social control of people whose behaviour and experience is unconventional, but not illegal. In a police state like Soviet Russia it is also an instrument of political control.

The main feature of the inquisitorial process is a primary presumption of guilt. The accused is put in the position of having to prove himself innocent. This is practically impossible to do. As soon as one is assumed guilty, even the most innocent action takes on a sinister cast, and tends to be seen as further evidence of guilt. No one can escape this psychological quirk, not even the most experienced judge. Our civil liberties are founded on recognition of this fact.

Similarly, once a person has been diagnosed or assumed to be mentally ill, ordinary human quirks come to be seen as signs of a malignant internal process which confirms the prior assumption.

Another inquisitorial feature is that the charge is implicit and general – witchcraft, heresy, treason, anti-Soviet activities and so on. The accused is not given specific details of his supposed crime: what, where, when, how. Nor is he allowed to confront his accuser. His actions are extrapolated from their relevant social context, while he is held in an ambiguous situation of menace, and given enough rope in the belief that sooner or later he will hang himself. And, in practice, if he fails to do so, he has, in fact, done so, since failure to hang himself simply shows how stubborn he is or cunning or both. He is damned if he does and damned if he does not.

The institutional psychiatric examination is formally similar.

There is the primary presumption of inner dysfunction.

The diagnosis is always a generality like ‘mental illness’, ‘schizophrenia’, and so on. The person is never told precisely what he is supposed to have said and done to demonstrate, in the eyes of the psychiatrist, mental disorder.

His actions are examined in isolation from their relevant social context, so that it is impossible to evaluate how, and to what extent, the source of his distress lies primarily in what others are doing to him, rather than in something ‘gone wrong’ inside himself – in other words, whether he is screaming with pain because there is a disease process, or because someone is twisting his arm.

He is not allowed to question the psychiatrist, or anyone else who says he is ill. As with the inquisitorial examination any attempt to question the credentials of the heresy- or witch-hunter (or any attempt to refute him) is taken as a sign of guilt, so any attempt by the putative patient to question or refute the psychiatrist is seen as confirmation of illness. It is usually labeled paranoia and lack of insight into the ‘fact’ that he is ill.

The principles on which the psychiatric examination should be based are, in my opinion, analogous to those of the accusatory system of due

process which hold in our Western open societies. Its features include the following:

– The person is presumed innocent until proven guilty. He has the right to know in specific detail the crime of which he is accused.

– He has a right to confront his accusers in a controlled situation, namely one in which he and they are treated as equals by the representative of justice. He is entitled to question and to seek to refute them, and to test their credibility; they are obliged to respect his questions and reply to them. In the course of questioning he is entitled to establish the context in which the alleged act(s) occurred, and to establish the kind of relationship obtaining between himself and the hostile witnesses. It is a dictum of the accusatory process that circumstances alter cases.

My examination of Rosie's case was guided by similar principles. These included:

1. A primary stance that what was being investigated was not a case of mental illness or madness, but a case of a complaint by one party that another was mentally ill. A type of social situation, rather than a person, was to be studied in the first instance.

2. A presumption that Rosie's peculiar behaviour was intelligible and even comprehensible in terms of her relevant current social situation, provided that it was studied by an appropriate method. The burden of proof of unintelligibility is on those attributing it, including the examining psychiatrist.

3. The right of Rosie to know what label had been ascribed her, and to know in specific detail what the others said she had said and done which led them to this conclusion. This included the right to be told the basis of the psychiatrist's opinion.

4. The right of Rosie to confront, question and seek to refute those who are calling her irrational. This included the right to confront and refute the psychiatrist or examiner, in this case me.

5. The provision of a proper situation in which those attributing irrationality are expected to take Rosie's questions seriously, and to answer them.

6. The provision of a referee who also unravels the complexities of their relationships, while helping them clarify points at issue between and amongst them.

We may now turn to the question of method. How do we test the clinical hypothesis? To discover whether and to what degree Rosie's actions make sense in the context of her current family situation I had to sample the family in a way that did justice to the complexities of the reciprocities of the interaction and inter-experience of its members. I had to observe at one and the same time each person in the family, the reciprocities between these persons and the family itself as a system.

The method I used involved observing the relationships of the members

of the family in all their permutations. I have described this in detail elsewhere.

People relate differently in different interpersonal contexts. A daughter in the presence of her father may act differently from the way she acts with her mother and, perhaps, differently again with them both. She may also experience herself differently in each of these situations, and no one way of experiencing and acting is necessarily more 'her' than any other. Not only may she experience herself differently in these different situations, she may remember different things, express different attitudes – even quite discordant ones – imagine and fantasy in different ways, and so on.

There is no way of knowing a priori the relationship between the pair she makes with her father, the pair with her mother, and the trio with both together. And similarly with the parents.

The family has to be systematically sampled to provide a comprehensive view. In a three person family (father, mother and daughter) it means seeing each person individually, then mother and daughter, father and daughter, mother and father and then mother, father and daughter, though not necessarily in that order. In a four person family (father, mother, son, daughter) again each is seen separately, then each pair, each threesome and all four together. And, if there are others (whether kin or not) who are regarded by members as contributing to the nexus, they must be included in the study, too. In Rosie's case this included her boy friend and her landlady.

Any or all of the permutations can be repeated until a picture emerges that demonstrably answers the question of the social intelligibility of the behaviour and experience under study. In Rosie's case it was the following picture.

Mrs Lander and her family said they were happy, united and close with no significant disharmony apart from Rosie. She was the odd one out who puzzled and alarmed them, her behaviour seemed so peculiar. The core of her peculiarity was that she had left her mother and rented a room of her own, even though she was still unmarried. This seemed bizarre to the point of perversity. They termed it unnatural.

This view was held by them all, including the three daughters who did live away from their mother, but they were married and that was different. They had added members to the family.

Just how close they were could be seen by the fact that Rosie's married sisters each phoned their mother twice a day and visited at least once weekly, while they phoned each other twice a week. They told me, too, they would never have dreamt of leaving home before they were married. Rosie's two younger sisters, who still lived at home, agreed.

Rosie, however, saw matters rather differently. She agreed the family was close and united, but she found its closeness intolerably restricting, and its unity closely controlling, allowing no room for being separate and individual. This, according to her, was largely due to the tight control exercised by her mother and grandmother over the children.

Against this control Rosie had constantly rebelled. Until puberty she had been quiet and biddable like her sisters, ‘a lovely girl’, her mother said. With the onset of puberty she had begun to rebel, and from then on she was a changed girl, ‘naughty’, said her mother. She continually complained of lack of privacy, of intrusiveness by her mother and grandmother and of lack of washing facilities – there was no running hot water and no bath. She insisted, too, on doing things her own way, for instance on going to the public baths more than once a week. She complained also of the others borrowing her clothes, and she rejected the clothes chosen for her by her mother and grandmother. She protested, too, about her mother’s cooking.

Rosie’s complaints were met with blank incomprehension, none of her sisters had objected. She was characterised as obstinate, bad-tempered, over-particular and always wanting to be different. This view of her was adopted by her sisters, too.

Now, none of this is very different from what goes on in many families with an independent-minded child and rather restrictive parents. And it might have continued indefinitely until Rosie was old enough to make her own way, but unfortunately, her grandmother died, reinforcing her mother’s emotional dependence on her children.

Mrs Lander was very insecure personally and financially. She saw her family as a refuge in an uncaring world. It was important for it to remain absolutely intact. The death of her husband when Rosie was eleven was a great blow emotionally and economically. She was left with six children to support. She fell back on her mother.

Her mother had always been a tower of strength, and Mrs Lander had always deferred to her. When Mrs Lander had to start working full time after her husband’s death her mother stepped into the breach. She moved in with her daughter and took over running the household.

Five years later when Rosie was sixteen, she and her grandmother had a furious row. It was over Rosie rejecting a dress her grandmother had chosen. The quarrel was more intense and prolonged than usual, and ended with the grandmother giving Rosie ‘a good hiding’, as Mrs Lander put it – a beating. A few days later the grandmother collapsed and died. Mrs Lander was upset and bitter, and reproached Rosie for so distressing her mother. Rosie, upset too, by her grandmother’s death, was shocked and withdrew emotionally. But Mrs Lander thought to herself defiantly, ‘Well, she had upset her.’

Her other daughters were upset, also, with Rosie, and though they said nothing, Rosie felt the pressure of their disapproval in their manner. Mrs Lander, aware of the atmosphere, made ostensible attempts to mitigate it, but in her ambivalence she made things worse, for she told the others she did not think one could die of giving a child a beating.

For the next six months Rosie struggled alone with the sense of guilt

and confusion generated by the family's implicit, unvoiced, unavowed and denied reproaches. Eventually it became too much, and she spoke to a friend in her office who was a committed Christian. Her friend spoke of Jesus forgiving sin, and briefly Rosie toyed with the idea of conversion. But how could she hurt her mother and her family, all observant, Orthodox Jews? In desperation she tried to confess to her mother, but Mrs Lander, barely comprehending, was shocked and reproachful. Rosie broke down in despair, laughing and crying all at once. The doctor was called, and she was taken into hospital. She was terrified.

Eleven months, nineteen insulin comas, three courses of electroshocks and numerous confinements in a padded room later Rosie was discharged. She returned home a shadow of her old self. Her spirit seemed crushed. To her mother, however, she seemed to be her biddable little girl again. But her spirit was not dead.

Her mother's part in having her sent away, combined with the psychiatric assault, had functioned to absolve her of her guilt over her grandmother's death. Nevertheless, it took years to recover from the effects of the psychiatric treatment. But gradually she began to reassert herself, and to start making complaints again about her mother's control at home.

But her family's attitude had changed. Her conduct formerly seen as naughty or bad was now seen as illness. This generated confusion in them, and further conflict with her, because she disputed that she had ever been ill. This strengthened her wish to leave home.

She got herself a job, and eventually, when she felt strong enough, she did leave and rented a room. She was twenty four.

She did not cut herself off from her mother. She visited at least once weekly and telephoned frequently, but Mrs Lander's refuge had been shaken again. Shocked, puzzled and bitter she constantly pressured Rosie to return, and she enlisted the help of her other daughters. She continually told Rosie how difficult it was to live on one's own, how much of a strain it was to manage financially, and how bad it would be for her health. She constantly offered unsolicited advice on how she should spend her money, while reproaching her for spending it unwisely, as she saw it, on clothes or scent or jewellery or even on presents for her and the family.

She told her, too, that people thought it wrong for an unmarried girl to live on her own, and that she would never get a husband. She told her she was shaming her family, and indeed her family was ashamed, so much so, that whenever she went out with her younger sisters to a dance, say, they introduced her as a cousin.

Meanwhile, Rosie fell in love with a young man, Benny, who lived with his parents. They went out together. Two or three years later she fell pregnant by him. They kept it secret from their families and arranged an abortion.

Shortly after certain things happened.

Rosie had been feeling guilty over her sexual relationship, and guilty over deceiving her mother. These feelings were compounded by guilt and deception over the pregnancy, and further compounded by guilt and deception over the abortion.

She felt unworthy and unattractive, and since she had gained weight, she decided to diet. She consulted her doctor. He advised her and prescribed appetite control pills. These she took under supervision. She also began to refuse the meals her mother offered when she visited, saying they were fattening. Her mother was upset.

Rosie began to lose weight. This alarmed her mother, who started badgering her to eat more, saying she would make herself ill. Rosie refused, and her mother started phoning the doctor, complaining Rosie was wasting away, and claiming his pills were harming her. He dismissed her complaints as groundless.

Mrs Lander made another move. Benny's parents had recently moved further away, and Benny with them. He was unable to see Rosie so often. Rosie, already emotionally vulnerable over the abortion, was upset. More important, Mrs Lander had been telling her that Benny was not the marrying kind. She now sought him out secretly and warned him off. He began to see Rosie even less often. Mrs Lander never told her she had seen Benny.

Rosie was now very unhappy, and it showed. Her family were convinced she was getting ill. Her mother wondered if it was because Benny was not the marrying kind, and she urged Rosie to eat to keep up her strength. Rosie refused this advice. Her mother then began calling on her with food. Rosie became increasingly exasperated. One morning she awoke to find her mother and eldest sister at her bedside with a meal. They had persuaded her landlady to admit them. She began to laugh and cry and scream. Alarmed, they called the doctor. When she saw him she was terrified and fell silent, withdrawing into herself. He had her admitted to hospital, her second admission.

Ten months later she was discharged. Rosie had maintained throughout she was not ill, and so her mother was given charge of a supply of tranquillisers. She was to see Rosie took them, but Rosie refused, and some weeks after she was back with her former landlady and working in a new job. She also made contact with Benny again, who was guilt-stricken. They began going out once more.

But the pressure from her family gradually built up. Her mother was constantly trying to get her to take the tranquillisers, without success. She ground up a tablet, and persuaded one of her other daughters to put the powder in the food she offered Rosie when she visited. Rosie was furious. She accused them of trying to drug her. They told her she was imagining it.

Rosie decided to lose weight again. And then she caught 'flu and was off work for about a week. Her mother visited her and once again tried to

make her eat. When Rosie refused she called on the landlady and asked her to persuade her. Rosie heard voices whispering outside her door, but when she opened it only the landlady was there. Her mother had slipped into another room. When Rosie asked the landlady whom she had been speaking to, the landlady said, 'No one', but Rosie remained suspicious.

A week later, Rosie, now convalescing, visited her mother, looking rather wan and thin. She accused her of plotting with the landlady. Her mother denied it. She then produced a meal of fried gefilte fish which Rosie refused. Mrs Lander became very alarmed indeed. She knew Rosie was getting ill because, she said, this used to be her favourite dish. She decided to act.

She was sure it was worry over her job that was making Rosie ill, and that she was going back too soon because she needed to pay for all those living expenses she had saddled herself with. She was sure, too, that her worry was caused by an unpleasant supervisor who Rosie had once said got on her nerves.

Without telling her daughter, Mrs Lander called at the office and spoke to her boss. She told him Rosie was ill. It was the supervisor's fault and he should control his staff better. He was angry and Mrs Lander flounced out. The following day when Rosie returned to work she was told to quit.

She was shattered. She went home and wept. She took a pill to help her sleep, but she woke in the night and, in a daze, she phoned her mother. Alarmed, Mrs Lander phoned Rosie's doctor and demanded he visit at once. He refused. She demanded a tranquilliser for her, and insisted on calling on him at three o'clock in the morning for it. She then phoned the landlady who told her to come at seven o'clock. Promptly at 7 a.m. she and her eldest daughter called. They entered Rosie's room, and she awoke to find her mother and sister standing over her once more, pressing on her a glass of milk. She screamed at them to go away and accused them of plotting to kidnap her again. Shocked, they called the doctor. She screamed at him he was in the plot too. Once again she was taken to hospital.

What has happened, you might ask, to all those signs of madness, all those so-called clinical features of schizophrenia? In my view, Rosie was never mad. She was being driven frantic with despair. Psychiatry cannot discriminate between being mad and being frantic as if one is mad. I am not saying there is no such occurrence as madness. I am not claiming all behaviour deemed mad is a rational or socially intelligible response to how others are acting towards one. In my experience, some people are mad by any test I know. But, what has this to do with a disease of the mind, in the psychiatric sense, if there is no demonstrable, relevant tissue damage or dysfunction? In far more cases than is generally recognised, if these people are studied in their relevant, current social and interpersonal contexts by a phenomenologically appropriate method, it will be found that they

are being invalidated and driven mad, albeit unwittingly, or driven frantic as if they are mad, by others including, I regret to say, psychiatrists themselves. In my view, psychiatry as a branch of medicine is a snare and a delusion. I believe its methods, based on this delusion, are completely misconceived. In my opinion, we need to start afresh, and look again at the people who come within the purview of psychiatrists. We need a new science, a science of persons and social situations. And we need a new profession of existential analysts, counsellors and guides that subsumes and surpasses psychiatry. This profession should systematically study and seek to understand the structure of human experience, the nature of misexperience and the intricacies of human relationships. And it should espouse appropriate principles and develop appropriate methods. This paper is intended as a contribution towards that end.

Aaron Esterson (1923–1999), originally a psychiatrist, reported his research questioning the existence of ‘schizophrenia’ in *Sanity, Madness and the Family: Families of Schizophrenics* (with R. D. Laing, 1964), *The Leaves of Spring: A Study in the Dialectics of Madness* (1970) and various papers. The film *The Space Between Words: Family* (BBC2, directed by Roger Graef, 1972) showed his work with one family. Esterson practised privately as an existential-phenomenological analyst, family analyst and supervisor in London from 1962 until his death.

‘Quintessential Phenomenology’

On Aaron Esterson’s ‘The Affirmation of Experience’

Anthony Stadlen

Aaron Esterson died on 15 April 1999. Among his papers was the typescript ‘The Affirmation of Experience’ (see the preceding article) and associated correspondence. On 9 July 1985 he was invited to read a paper at the Simon Silverman Phenomenology Symposium of 6–7 March 1986. On 3 December he posted the typescript, well before the deadline, 1 January. But on 16 December he withdrew it.

Why?

His paper was far more radical than most papers on phenomenology and psychiatry. Most offer ‘phenomenology’ as a ‘technique’ within the medical ‘discipline’ ‘psychiatry’.

But Esterson *contrasts* phenomenology with psychiatry. Phenomenology, he says, studies experience, but psychiatry ‘negates’ experience. Psychiatry is ‘a snare and a delusion’. Its methods are ‘completely misconceived’. We need ‘a new science, a science of persons and social situations’ and ‘a new profession of existential analysts, counsellors and guides’.

Few psychiatrists or even phenomenologists could see his point. Many people called this great existential phenomenologist ‘not existential’, ‘not phenomenological’. Even though he was used to being patronised or dismissed, he intended to go to the symposium.

But then he received a letter dated 9 December from Dr Richard Rojcewicz, co-director of the Phenomenology Center. It began:

‘Thank you for your letters of Nov. 17 and Dec. 3 and for the copy of your paper. I daresay your talk will be well received, having read it.’

Esterson replied on 16 December:

‘I have received your letter of the 9th December. In view of the extraordinary attitude of your opening lines I think it would be best if I withdrew from your Symposium.’

Rojcewicz’s second sentence did seem gauche and backhanded. But did Esterson, or I, understand American English?

In 2000 I telephoned the Phenomenology Center. Its then Chair, Fr. David L. Smith, remembered the Esterson episode well. They had concluded he was mad.

I telephoned Rojcewicz. He remembered Esterson, with feeling. He was mystified by his withdrawal. His paper had been really interesting, a fine case study. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘but ...’ – and I read his ‘I daresay’ sentence back

to him. ‘Exactly,’ said Rojcewicz.

‘In English English that sounds backhanded,’ I said. ‘But I’m an anglophile,’ he said. ‘I love Shakespeare, Keats, Sherlock Holmes, P. G. Wodehouse. I was expressing myself in an *English* way. Understated.’ ‘I see,’ I said. I rang off. How could he think...?

The minute I put the phone down I saw it. I rang back. ‘When you said P. G. Wodehouse – were you being ... *Jeeves*?’ ‘That’s it,’ he said. ‘I see,’ I said.

Rojcewicz is a superb translator of Heidegger. His book *The Gods and Technology: A Reading of Heidegger* is outstanding.

Esterson, by some miracle, had found his ideal reader, had he only known. This was a mis-meeting between two of the world’s finest phenomenologists. A simple question from either to the other could have made it a meeting.

In October 2013, I questioned Rojcewicz again. Did he still recall the paper? ‘Yes. It showed how what looks like disturbance in one person can make sense if it’s studied in its social context.’ Did he keep a copy? ‘No.’ So he had understood the heart of it, and remembered it, having had it in his hands for only a few days twenty-eight years ago. Had anyone else read it? ‘No.’ Had anyone else ever withdrawn? ‘No.’ Had he read all papers submitted for all thirty-one annual symposia – one hundred and twenty-four papers plus Esterson’s? ‘Yes, except for a couple which came in late. But I heard them all.’ How did he rate Esterson’s paper? ‘Quintessential phenomenology.’

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Kierkegaardian Selves: The Will Transformed

Dr Tamar Aylat-Yaguri

Abstract

The self as an entity of being and becoming, is revealed as a dynamic process of constant change. The nature of this process as well as the structure of the self in Kierkegaard's philosophy takes more than one shape as his thought evolves. This may be somewhat surprising. Isn't the self's structure and its lineation essentially constant, while the content alone is the changing ingredient? This is not the case in Kierkegaard's philosophy, where the very formation of the self changes (along with its content). In this paper I elaborate on Kierkegaard's early view of the self's structure. I then emphasize the dramatic change we find in *Sickness unto Death*, where the self is changed in both structure and content..

Keywords

Kierkegaard, self, will, imagination, humour, death, reflexivity, narrative.

I am my will

In Kierkegaard's early writings, from *Either/Or* to the *Postscript*, the self is depicted as having at its core one's will. Kierkegaard's view of the self postulates will as an Archimedean point of the self, from which volition shape existence. The will binds together the different aspects of one's self into a whole. In a way, the self *is* its will, or the lack of will. A coherent self relates itself to its will in a concrete way, by addressing directly the actual possibilities while considering its own interests. Additionally, a self incorporates imaginary constructions to produce a tangible picture of the willed situation.

Let us briefly consider the following pseudonyms:

A, the aesthete from *Either/Or I*, wills pleasure over pain, and wishes to have laughter always on his side. William, from *Either/Or II*, loves his wife and wills with his whole heart, to have 'the strength never to want to love any other' (Kierkegaard, 1987: p 9). De Silentio wills, in *Fear and Trembling*, to understand Abraham. Constantine Constantius wills to be happy again through repetition. Climacus wills to become a Christian and attain eternal happiness. Anti-Climacus *is* Christian. Is he eternally happy? For him, it seems, eternal happiness manifest itself as upbuilding and awakening. In being a Christian, Anti-Climacus *is* eternally happy, and so anybody can be who opens his eyes to see the truth. So, what now?

What does Anti-Climacus will?

I want to suggest that he wills nothing much. He wills nothing much for himself, nothing that takes over and dominates his life. Clearly none of his willingness is defined as infinite or eternal. *I want to suggest that he is not constituted by his will as the rest of the pseudonyms are.* His self is transformed so that different psychological building blocks are needed to make this new construct intelligible.

Will, imagination and self-humour

Let's consider Climacus, to see a psychological constitution of self – the building blocks – that Kierkegaard employs before he moves to the special case of Anti-Climacus. Famously, Climacus presents himself in the introduction to the *Postscript* in the following way:

I, Johannes Climacus, born and bred in this city and now thirty years old, an ordinary human being like most folk, assume that a highest good, called an eternal happiness, awaits me just as it awaits a housemaid and a professor. I have heard that Christianity is one's prerequisite for this good. I now ask how I may enter into relation to this doctrine.

(Kierkegaard, 1982: pp 15-16)

Climacus perceives his *self*, the construct and contents represented by his use of the word 'I,' as something separated from the world; or in the case at hand, something separated from Christianity, which he wants to engage. I'll consider here three elements that constitute this self: will, imagination and self-humour. Together they form a psychological construction that addresses the question: how does the self grasp itself?

The *will* is the determining factor of the self. The answer to: who are you? is not any specific trait, attribute, or characteristic – being tall, dark and handsome. The answer to 'what are you?' is translated to the question, 'what do you wish for?' What do you will yourself to be? Climacus, by his free choice, wills the highest good. That's the best account we have of who he is¹. Passion is transformed into will that defines a purpose: where am I aiming my life? This makes will the decisive component of the self. Within the stages on life's way, this places Climacus in the ethico-religious realm.

Imagination is the second element of the human soul. Climacus regards it as 'wings' that were given to human beings to elevate themselves (ibid. p 361). Imagination, unlike fantasy, is constrained and focused by thoughts and feelings. Unlike fantasy, it's not radically opposed to rational or emotional common sense. Imaginary constructions illustrate a possible existence (while fantasy illustrates impossible existence). Climacus' aim towards eternal happiness depends on his ability to imagine what that might mean.

He desires an existence that he has not yet experienced and whose reality is not yet his. The possibility of making it his own reality through his actions is dependent on imagining eternal happiness. He weaves the imagined missing links of existence into his well-constructed dialectical thinking. By doing so he creates a fuller and more coherent picture of his life, here and hereafter.

The third element in this account of the self is *humour*. Thinking and dialectical analysis (in which imagination has a major role) are connected by humour with the actuality of the here and now. In the face of suffering, for example, a laughing (not mocking) self-humour can see the world for what it is (Watkin, 2001: p 126). For Climacus humour is an intermediate bridge between imaginary constructions and perceptions of reality. Why is this bridge of self-humour required? Being able to imagine a desired reality illustrates a possible existence, but this ability is also a source of pain. It is painful to emphasize the gap between the desirable and the existing. Imagination enhances or spotlights all that has not yet been achieved. Imagining what might be creates a gap, a vast abyss, a rift between where Climacus is, and where he wishes to be. At this sensitive point, despair could very well take over. Self-Humour becomes important in monitoring despair.

Climacus says, humourously, that eternal happiness awaits him – just as it awaits a housemaid and a professor. The humour is that this most serious, self-important thinker, writer of tomes, suddenly identifies his fate with that of a simple housemaid or a foolishly pompous professor. Here, Climacus demonstrates his ability to laugh at himself and his situation. Why, in the midst of earnestly confessing, with his soul at stake, does he mention these figures? Is he just being liberal, open-minded, remarking that in assuming eternal happiness he is nothing special? But then we realise that the housemaid and professor are just the opposite, from who he takes himself to be. We also know that even if either could win eternal happiness, we still need to ask, what does eternal happiness means anyway? Could Climacus, the housemaid, and the professor *all* join the society of the saved? Isn't Climacus more likely to distance himself from such society, to think, with Groucho Marx, 'I wouldn't belong to any club that accepts me as a member?!'

Without self-humour, Climacus could not seriously will his absurd goal of gaining eternal happiness. If he thought seriously about his goal – surely a remote possibility – his will would be broken; suffering would take over. Humour lets him bridge the abyss between imagination and reality that otherwise would remain in ultimate opposition. Once imagination and reality are fused – one attains faith, when Climacus attains Christianity (if he does), humour is no longer needed.

New approach to death

Now let us move to the next pseudonym, Anti-Climacus. Anti-Climacus' view of the self is different from Climacus' view and from the view of previous pseudonyms. It is not enough any more to bring together and harmonize the constitutive elements of the self through passion and will, imagination and humour. What is required now from the self (in order for it to be a self) is a whole new take on death – hence a whole new take on life. In addition, a different psychological formation is required. The self is not an individualistic entity facing the world, apart from it and its desired qualities. Now the self is a self exactly because it does *not* stand 'outside' the world, but is absorbed or immersed in it. The world-view is changed. We can see the change emerge 5 years before *The Sickness Unto Death* in Kierkegaard's discourse, *The Thorn in the Flesh*:

A person is looking for peace, but there is change: day and night, summer and winter, life and death; a person is looking for peace, but there is change: fortune and misfortune, joy and sorrow; ... a person is looking for peace – where did he not look for it – even in the disquietude of distraction – where did he not look for it in vain – even in the grave!

(Kierkegaard, 1990: p 328)

Peace is not found anywhere, not even in death. This could be seen as the entry-gate to Anti-Climacus' world-view. I will briefly discuss his approach to death in this discourse, and then move to the new formulation of self.

What makes Anti-Climacus' self different is his new take on death, a new perspective that is required in order for the self to be a self. Anti-Climacus attributes to 'the natural man' a standard view of death (Kierkegaard, 1980, 8). The 'natural man' thinks that 'Humanly speaking, death is the last of all, and, humanly speaking, there is hope only as long as there is life.' (ibid. 7) Death is the boundary to life and the end of everything, including hope. This is the view of death of non-Christians referred to as 'natural man.'

For a Christian believer, however, death is not the 'end of the world,' it is not the greatest threat in and to life. It is not the end, firstly, because the believer has faith in the resurrection and the afterlife (ibid. ibid.). Secondly, it is not the end, because the gravest risk is not death but despair in this life, despair over failing to be oneself.

Anti-Climacus introduces a fear greater than the fear of death, a fear so great that it overcomes a fear of death. The 'natural man,' knows no fear greater than death. The Christian fears for his immortal soul, which is a fear greater than death. True, the Christian can continue to fear 'everything that goes under the name of earthly and temporal suffering... [that is, all] earthly

and worldly matters, death included.’ (ibid. p 8) But that fear is no longer dominate: ‘Only the Christian knows what is meant by sickness unto death.’ It means a sickness concerning the state of one’s soul, not a sickness at the fact one will die. In facing this soul-sickness, a Christian gains ‘a courage that the natural man does not know.’ He gains this courage by ‘learning to fear something even more horrifying’ than death (ibid. ibid.).

Psychology that is based on ‘human nature’ and on prevailing norms will not understand Anti-Climacus. Normal human beings are supposed to fear death. Existential psychotherapists, like the American, Irvin Yalom (2000), write that death is the extinction of consciousness, and so the extinction of everything. Psychologically speaking, consciousness is all that we have and death is the extinction of consciousness. Thus death is the extinction of everything. For a healthy psychological profile, some fear of death is not just normal but is also required. Anyone who does not fear death to a reasonable degree should be regarded as dangerous to himself and/or to others. This represents the common thought in the field of existential psychotherapy (other realms of psychotherapy may not place such an emphasis on the normal dread of death).

Anti-Climacus does not accept these psychological presuppositions. He does not seriously fear death; nevertheless, he is not a danger to himself and poses no danger to others. On the contrary: he testifies that he enjoys consummate health and vitality (Kierkegaard, 1980: p 8). Thus it is clear that we need a new psychological exposition, a Christian one, and Anti-Climacus provides it.

Franz Kafka takes an approach to death that could help us to understand Anti-Climacus. He writes:

one of the first signs of the beginning of understanding is the wish to die. This life appears unbearable, another unattainable. One is no longer ashamed of wanting to die; one asks to be moved from the old cell, which one hates, to a new one, which one only in time will come to hate. In this there is also a residue of belief that during the move the master will chance to come along the corridor, look at the prisoner and say: ‘this man is not to be locked up again. He is to come to me.’

(Kafka, 1991: p 72)

Kafka writes these insightful thoughts on death in his *Blue Octavo Notebooks* (1917-1919). He may have been reading *Sickness Unto Death* at this time. He mentions Kierkegaard explicitly on the same day that he writes:

The lamentation around the deathbed is actually the lamentation over the fact that here no dying in the true sense has taken place... Our salvation is death, but not this one.

(ibid. pp 99-100)

He distinguishes death observed ‘around the deathbed’ and true death. Every death that is not *my* death is irrelevant to my salvation. So ‘Salvation is death, but not this one,’ for this one is only an observed death. We are accustomed to think of death as the end of all, the absolute cessation and termination. But Kafka reminds us that this is true only in the case of our own death, and that any other death could bring ‘the real sorrow of the end, but not *the* end.’ In his Kafkaian way he turns sorrow against us in saying that we cry and lament around the deathbed *not* because the person died, but because his death is not enough – for us his death is not the end of all, so we still have to face it, and this is a cause of sorrow, that the end has not come.

A Christian self

We need a new psychological exposition to understand the new take on death that emerges with Anti-Climacus’ Christian constitution of self. The new concept of self in *Sickness Unto Death* takes an unexpected point of departure. The self is no longer an individualistic entity facing the world, apart from it and its desired qualities. Anti-Climacus doesn’t even start with the self because the self is not yet *there*. At the start, the individual is *not* a self. The self is formed through relationships that at the start are not-yet-a-self. He focuses on what he calls ‘spirit.’

Once a self is formed, it does *not* stand ‘outside’ the world, but is immersed *in* it. *Will* is no longer the Archimedean point. The starting place is not a point, but a field that encloses and composes a number of opposed existential poles. Of course will, imagination and self-humour still play a part in the dynamics of this field. But their presence is less pronounced. They are not the dominating force or center of the self. In the new construction, they are subordinate factors.

Imagine Anti-Climacus’ vision of what precedes the formation of self as a shadow presented on the wall of a cave. The self is not yet in that picture, first, as a matter of theory: When we take a theoretical stance, we stand back from the object that is viewed. Thus the viewer giving a theoretical account does not include his role as viewer or theorist. And second, the self is not in the wall-picture because the self at issue is a practical or existential self, and that self has to be the unique individual, Anti-Climacus, not a wall-map of abstract relational polarities. These polarities must become synthesized, glued together as his own self, as the field of his existential living or being. That will not happen on the wall of a cave.

Nevertheless this is his abstract account of the world of self-relations seen objectively as something outside my self. The projected picture provides an array of existential poles or axes that prompt a broad construal of the esthetic and the ethical-religious world-views. The poles of finite/infinite,

temporal/eternal, necessary/ possible, physical/ psychical, are synthesized in a particular way in the formation of any particular self.

- (1) The esthetic view of existence give stress to the finite, the temporal, the necessary (or factual), and the physical poles, neglecting the opposite poles.
- (2) The ethical-religious view of existence gives stress to the infinite, the eternal, freedom, and the psychical poles, neglecting the opposite poles.
- (3) When the opposed poles are more appropriately balanced, neither pole dominating, there is the possibility of a self that overcomes the primal fear of death.

Remember that whatever Climacus wants, he wants with infinite striving passion. Anti-Climacus, in contrast, does not *strive* to better his life, but is struck by something prior to striving or wanting. Instead of a striving will being active, one's will is overcome by the sense of already being immersed in the world, by the sense of will, imagination, and humour now being shifted to the background. When *striving* dominates, the vividness of a world retreats except as a field of struggle. If there is a world ready to intervene, to strike him, to disrupt him, the frantic will, bent on mastery, leaves no room for it to arrive. Anti-Climacus is immersed in a world whose vividness puts the striving will to one side.

Anti-Climacus dies to the world that Climacus tried to master. The world Anti-Climacus is immersed in is not the world others find to be a world inviting the conquering self. In leaving mastery behind, Anti-Climacus finds himself open to a new world saturated by what he will call Absolute Power. The non-striving exemplified by Anti-Climacus' provides space for Absolute Power to speak and create. This Power unifies existential polarities and their background and the newly formed self finds itself immersed in a new world-landscape.

Becoming a self

There is a contrast, as I mentioned, between the abstract, theoretical wall-picture of self-factors, on the one hand, and the actual existential formation of a self, on the other. Getting this picture of self-synthesis theoretically correct, both the loss of striving and the new world then available focused in an Absolute Power, is an accomplishment one can take pride in. But getting the picture right doesn't quite earn a life-time achievement award. Getting it theoretically correct is only half the challenge. To actually *live from* the picture, to be an *exemplar* of what the picture puts in focus, requires an existential *willingness to live in accordance with it*. One can get the picture right, seeing correctly that what is needed is a dying to the world. But 'getting the picture right' objectively is irrelevant, and pride in ones intellectual achievement is beside the point. To *live from* or *embody* the

truth of the picture correctly, existentially, practically, is an *infinite* task, one that can never be accomplished.

For Anti-Climacus the task of embodying this truth is not a matter of striving (as Climacus would have it) but a task of submission, of *yielding* to a power that constitutes the self. Despair holds a place for a complex existential demand: one is prompted to stay immersed in the world, not the world of human, worldly affairs, and striving, but the world offered by a transcendent, absolute Other. The dynamic in which that despair is assuaged incorporates viewer and vision, human being and world-view, and enfoldes the dynamic of selfhood.

There is one more matter to explore. This account of the new psychological construction is not quite enough, since it is not clear what makes the self dynamic *mine*? What gives *me* authority over this self? And what makes it *continuously* mine?

If we were to draw a simple picture, we might imagine, for Climacus, a circle with a small ‘w’ at the center for ‘the will’ – knowing that nevertheless there is no ‘place’ within the self where the will resides. Perhaps the image of a seedless grape self would do for something without an ontological center. The self in Anti-Climacus’ is centre-less self, but less like a seedless grape that like an old rambling city, a painting with detail strewn all over, or a piece of music, say an overture with several motifs. These images help to show how something (a self) can be more or less unified and organized, a functionally unfolding entity, yet without a discernable center.

Centre-less Self

Let us imagine Anti-Climacus’s self as a musical work, a set of lines unfolding in time for the ear. In *Selves in Discord and Resolve*, Edward Mooney explains that: ‘self is like the tonal center that defines a musical key.’ (1996, 98)ⁱⁱ The self unfolds as the piece unfolds. A musical key can exfoliate, form fluently through time, moving as the music weaves and rounds out, without there being an ontologically separate centre. There is no *one particular* source of its unified authority. This music, like the self of Anti-Climacus, has no ‘independent *choosing* center (or faculty of will)’ (ibid. p 92). And there is no one particular source of its unified authority is not found in any one place but is dispersed through the piece as it is played.

Anti-Climacus’s faithful non-despairing self unfolds just as a piece of music unfolds. The power of music seems to bequeath to the piece an elusive sense of authoritative tonal centre. The self is revealed as ‘a network of relationship that makes up a (perhaps incomplete) whole that relates to itself. This whole, or self ensemble then relates [receptively] to something outside itself, a power that grounds or founds it.’ (ibid. p 94)

Now what makes this complex, dynamic phenomenon, *mine* in particular? What makes it *continuously* mine? I cannot peer into my inner space and

see the elements of self unmistakably branded with my name on them. So at best, we can argue from the analogy of music. We can explore how the presence of *reflexivity*, *gravitational force*, and *narrative centre* serve to give a piece of music its signature identity. By analogy, the presence of these three can provide the sense that the dynamic ‘self-relating self-relations dependent on Another’ is mine, and continuously mine.

Reflexivity, gravitational force, and narrative centre

Through *reflexivity*, the complex bundle of relations exerts authority just in the way it comes together as *this very field* of its relationships, relating to itself, and to a grounding power. ‘No one element in this field dominates, or even easily separated out from the other, for each element is defined in terms of its polar opposite.’ (ibid. p 98) Each element belongs to the others, recognizing the other element as ‘mine,’ and the totality as ‘mine.’ The way a particular a piece of music becomes what it is, each element belonging to the whole, and the whole claiming the parts as ‘mine,’ is just the way self-factors in a field of unfolding relationships belong together in a whole, where any one element can say ‘mine’ of the others to which it belongs. Through reflection we are self aware of our self,

we make sense of a self ... by specifying the relational, reflexive field it constitutes. This means sensing its connections to various persons, institutions, and projects; it means sensing values, ideals, points of aspiration that, in the nature of the case, a self will fail to live up to. So sensing a self or sphere will also mean sensing its forms of failure or despair.

(ibid. p 95)

The self, sensing itself, can trace itself and become aware of itself either in inward or outward cues, in an inner sense of delight or in ‘outer’ sense of Godly presence. The latter, outer sense of divine presence, provides the grounding power that ‘roots us’ by ‘rooting out’ despair.

Let us briefly consider the last two principles. Beyond reflexivity, self is a centre of gravitational force, and a narrative centre. As a centre of gravitational force, ‘The vectors of self are infused, activated, empowered, from without.’ (ibid. p 93) For Anti-Climacus it is mostly the grounding power of faith, and ‘attaining faith is not at last an act of choice. It is, as Anti-Climacus has it, being grounded in another’ (ibid. p 97). Other elements that place the self as a centre of gravitational force are family, friends, work relations, institutions, projects, values, ideals, aspiration and will.

As a *narrative centre*, the self creates and maintains its particularity and continuity, by being and becoming the story that it tells about itself. As a narrative centre of gravity, a self ‘... is something of outmost importance

for stability and function, unmistakably present, yet tantalizingly difficult to isolate' (ibid. p 99). It is difficult to isolate because it is not an item or element, but a pattern discerned, or felt, as an elusive dynamic.

The story that Anti-Climacus is narrating is the story of the truly religious self, the Christian self, that contains an important truth: 'The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing [giving away] to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it' (Kierkegaard, 1980: p 14).

Searching for the 'real self'

Kierkegaard's views on anxiety and melancholy, on existence and being, on individual self and relational self, have inspired and influenced existential-phenomenological analysis and practice (Deurzen, 2010: pp 9-20; Thomte, 1980, pp xvii-xviii). My own discussion of two psychological constructions which are found in Kierkegaard have a bearing on existential analysis and practice, as well. Therapeutic practice places great importance on the client's account of what the 'real self' is. However, we suggested that there is more than one 'basic' structure of the 'real self.' If there can be two self structures, which is the 'real' one? The answer could not be simply that the current self is the 'real' one. The client in analysis is not yet in touch with 'the real self.' The goal of analysis is to search for the 'real self,' a self beyond or beneath the current, easily accessible self.

Kierkegaard's first self-structure has will as its centre. This is a Sartrean self who is taken to be the sole creator of itself. The other self-structure is fundamentally religious. It managed to overcome fear of death, has no centre, and is a field of dynamic self-relations. This is not a Sartrean self-creator but a self that is a 'co-creator' with God (Ferreira, 2009: p 152; Lippitt, 2012: p 107). This later self is subjected to reflexivity, absolute dependence on God as the Absolute other, and is held by gravitational force, and centred by its narrative. Elements recognize their belonging together, which makes this unfolding psychological construction continuously mine.

The religious self in Anti-Climacus' account is distinctive. Its project is 'a polemic against the notions of self-creation and absolute autonomy that have become a part of secular existentialist accounts of the self.' (Ferreira, 2009: p 166) For the religious self, will and striving for goals are diminished. The world of striving retreats to be replaced by a new world in which the self is serenely, receptively, immersed. Both self and world, Christianly speaking, are sustained by God, and are immersed in powers the self does not control. It yields receptively, willingly. It is a world where I do not will X to be done, but pray that 'thy will be done.'

This response to the question 'which self, among the multiple selves I might become do I choose?' by *withdrawing* from that question. The answer

is not in one's power to choose, but in one's receptivity to a world one is dependent on and immersed in – a world of intricate social and natural relations. One depends on bread and butter, cows and grass, sun and rain, mothers and fathers, chieftains and prime ministers, sheriffs and school teachers. Escaping despair means acknowledging this dependence. While willing to achieve certain goals, one also yields to the support that cows and butter, teachers and sisters, provide.

An existential psychoanalytical therapist, if she or he is to learn from Kierkegaard, must accept that there is more than one possible self-structure available to a client. Perhaps the client can thrive within the structure of the striving self. But it is also possible that the client will thrive within the structure of the receptive self marked by willingness more than will. The therapist will support the client on occasions when a striving-will seems the best self to be encouraged. But the therapist will also remain open to occasions when the receptive self seems the best self to support. Then the relevant self structure will be a client's receptive willingness, willingness to accept healthy dependencies.

Notes

ⁱ Some writers distinguish direct from indirect volitionalism. From his opening words, it seems that Climacus presupposes direct volition and that his is the highest level of the power to will.

ⁱⁱ The image for the self provided by Mooney in his book, seems just right for the concept of self under discussion.

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Madness As An Escape

Ekaterina Denyskova

Abstract

It is proposed for consideration that madness is an escape. Based on the ideas of L. Binswanger's existential analysis, psychopathology is seen as a specific way of life. The factors that induce and control 'escape' are analyzed. I consider the conditions of human life, which may cause a person 'to escape into madness' as a way out of intolerable circumstances.

Keywords

Existential psychopathology, escape, madness.

In an attempt to understand the inner worlds of people with mental problems, we inevitably have to search for a comprehensible language which can help us to describe what kinds of things happen in a person's mind.

Human cultures have different ways in which to present some particular types of madness. Sometimes illness can take the symbolic form of the clothes of H G Wells *Invisible Man* which existed to mask emptiness, or as a smoke screen, sometimes looked at as a misleading manoeuvre or a sucking funnel, 'a black hole', an escape. This paper offers insight into the mental aspect of a runaway type.

As a juridical term, 'runaway' first began its usage from criminals' flights from prisons. One of the meanings of the word is 'discharged of something (unpleasant, painful)' (Yefremova, 2000). Escape can be a way out when a person feels themselves as a prisoner, as a slave of circumstance, or of other people, or even of destiny. Escape in mental conditions is similar to the flight to safe, more comfortable place, to freedom from captivity. By escaping into madness, the person discharges himself of responsibility for everything, for his life and even rejection for himself.

What moves mentally ill persons to escape? Binswanger considers responsibility and freedom to be important factors of psychopathologic resistance (Binswanger, 1999). Courage promotes being responsible and free (Tillich, 1995).

What things are unbearable in reality for insane people? What do they escape from? It is the inability to resist circumstances, other people, fear, and despair. They see no way out, and even if by chance, is visible, it appears too complicated or simply impossible. They choose madness so as 'not to be', 'not to know', 'not to feel', 'not to answer', 'not to do', 'not to live so'. Madness is chosen to avoid the excessive choice. Madness

here means the absence of a person's spiritual forces to face reality.

In this paper, I try to avoid theoretical formulations, diagnostic descriptions, and other techniques of professional vocabulary. Rather, I refer to literature in order to make the descriptions more vivid. Literature is able to express and determine what is not always possible with science. According to Miguel de Unamuno (1962), the philosophy of a 'specific individual', in his own flesh and blood, can best comprehend their subject in the spheres of art and literature, where a person can discover himself in the immediate reality.

A madness process similar to 'runaway' is described in Dostoevsky's (2009) novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. Fyodor Dostoevsky was a deeply psychological writer, looking inside human emotional experience and the origin of mental illness. Dostoevsky is interesting for his existential philosophy and psychotherapy as he places emphasis on the human consciousness. He captures it in its movements, uncertainties, and incompleteness.

He understood much from experience, his own experiences and other people's fits of madness. He studied human lives closely and understood why one could go mad. In his novels, no type of madness is the same: for example, Ivan's case from *The Brothers Karamazov* and Anastasia's and Prince Myshkin's cases from *The Idiot* differ both in structure and in origin.

Ivan Karamazov is the central character of the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*; his life and example have been selected as 'case record' for this article. This article is an attempt to understand how it is possible to describe what is happening in psychopathology without scientific terminology. So we are going to find out why Ivan Karamazov's mental illness features resemble runaway.

Anamnesis of Ivan Karamazov's Life

Ivan was the middle son from the second marriage of a rather poor landowner named Fyodor Karamazov, a passionate person sunken in vice. Ivan's mother was an orphan. She grew in the rich house of a General's widow, her benefactor. Her life there was intolerable. Ivan's father took her away from the widow's house and soon he began to harass his young wife. He did it cruelly, and her 'nervous female illness' progressed before the births of her children. Fits of hysteria were extremely heavy and lasted long, such fits to which Ivan was often witness.

Ivan was seven when his mother died. After her death, his father banished him and his junior brother Aleksey to a servant, Grigory's, log hut. He was a gloomy and silly 'philosophizer' but he treated the boys better than their father. Nevertheless, the living conditions, as well as Grigory himself, depressed the children's mentality. Afterwards, the orphans were taken in by the General's widow, who, as it turned out, soon died.

The children's next tutor was the widow's relative, a marshal of provincial

nobility, Efim Polenov. He was kind to Ivan and Aleksey and brought them with his own finances. Ivan showed both great interest and ability in learning. The tutor hoped the boy would see a great future, which is why he employed the best teacher in town, and paid him well for the boy's learning.

Ivan grew up as a gloomy, closed off boy. He realized early he was growing in strangers' families, on the strangers' support, and that his father had no shame. When Ivan finished grammar school, the tutor and the teacher were not still alive. Though Ivan had no means for living, he entered the university.

Harsh reality broke Ivan's ambitious plans. He rented a poor cold room and in order not to starve, he wrote articles for newspapers. He was talented and overshadowed all the young men that worked in that particular field. He never asked his father for any help. It was important for Ivan to be financially independent. He could not bear to be indebted to anyone. As Dostoevsky (2009) tells, this was caused by his great pride and a cold reasoning that he could not get any serious support from his father. Nevertheless, he always had necessary means for a young nobleman-student's life. Popularity came to Ivan Karamazov after his bold, debatable article on a crucial issue – the church court.

During this time, Ivan moved to his father's house and, to the great surprise of everyone, got along with his father quite well. He never asked for money or complained of his unhappy childhood. There Ivan got a devoted admirer of his thoughts – Fyodor Karamazov's illegitimate son – Smerdyakov, who was a servant.

Living in a small town, he often visited with local society, sparkling with his intellect and erudition. He also had a nice appearance and good health and was therefore distinguished among other young men. Ivan Karamazov did not see anybody who was equal with him. He treated people politely, but always haughtily felt even contempt for some people, including his father.

The local society considered Ivan to be an interesting and cheerful man although he had no real friends in the town. He did not call anybody 'friend'. It was beneath his dignity to offer friendship to anybody, and he avoided those people that he was not going to make friends with. Ivan made the only attempt to become closer to his brother, Aleksey, but it did not turn out so. 'Ivan is haughty,' said his father.

People admired him though they saw he was too proud, cold, and reserved! He kept in secret the true reason of his arrival: to inform Katherine, his brother Dmitry's, bride (Ivan's secret love and passion) that their engagement had been cancelled. Ivan arrived so hastily to fulfil his brother's request because he hoped to speak to Katherine about his own feelings.

Here is Ivan's brief story before the beginning of events which became a serious test for his heart, conscience, and mind, which he could not withstand without having run away in madness.

From this moment on, only key moments will be described, that is, key

steps. Each of these steps ruined individual values that had been keeping Ivan from moral destruction, but demanded the price which he did not want and was not ready to pay. We should pay special attention to Ivan's psychosomatic, emotional, and mental reactions to these events. Being healthy both physically and mentally, Ivan reacts to these circumstances with headache and his physical and mental health begin to deteriorate.

The 1st Step: Being with a surprising thirst for revenge

With difficulty, Ivan stops the fight between the senior brother Dmitry and his father (an attack of jealousy; both men love the same woman). After that incident, Aleksey notices with fear that there could be a murder! 'God forbid!' says he. And Ivan, 'having twisted a mouth spitefully' answers: 'And why should God "forbid"? One monster will eat the other one, it would serve right!' Then he adds, as recovering: 'I, certainly, will not allow the commission of murder as I haven't allowed it till now' (Dostoevsky, 2009). After this he says he has a headache and they go out.

In the yard, Aleksey asks Ivan: 'Brother, let me ask once more: does any person have the right to determine, looking on others, who of them is worthy of life and who is more worthy?' To which Ivan answers: 'As to rights, who hasn't the right to wish? And to wish even death. Why should we lie to ourselves when all people live this way and, perhaps, they cannot live in any different way?' And just then he asks Aleksey, 'Let me ask you ... do you think I can shed Aesop's blood like Dmitry, that is, kill him?' Aleksey answers no and Ivan thanks him and continues: 'You know, I will always defend him. But as for my desires, I reserve a full set of options ... do not condemn and do not look at me as I am a malefactor', he added smiling. After this dialogue, Ivan shook Aleksey's arm so kindly and openly, in so unnatural a manner for him, that the brother had a feeling that it was done with a 'certain intention'. If Ivan wanted support, it may be understood as: 'if you do not condemn me, it means I'm not guilty'

The 2nd Step: Being with wounded pride

Ivan wants 'to get acquainted with Aleksey'. He tries to be extremely frank and speaks as if in confession. He tells him about his doubts, that he cannot love all these 'neighbours', and does not understand why he must pretend that he does. He worries much as he does not accept injustice of the world as created by God. But each time he reaches the moment when he becomes pitiful and defenceless he changes his manner and starts speaking with irony, self-irony that depreciates the value of his conversation with Aleksey.

Then Ivan tells Aleksey that in such an imperfect world among all those 'neighbours', he loves only children because they are defenceless against the evil of adults. He speaks about one prisoner, a thief and murderer.

Once, during a robbery, he killed two small children without even so much as feeling sorry for them. But being in prison, he found an unusual love for children in himself and even made friends with one boy who often played in the prison yard. The boy often came to him and they would talk. At this moment, Ivan feels a strong headache again and his demeanour begins to sadden. Aleksey notices that he is speaking 'in madness'. Aleksey says it aloud but Ivan pretends not to hear it and changes the subject, that is to say, Ivan doesn't want to continue the story.

This prisoner who first kills children and then reaches out to the boy in the prison yard resembles Fyodor Karamazov, the father of Dmitry, Ivan, and Aleksey. He also first 'killed' these boys, and later tried to 'reach out' to them.

After this, Ivan says that he has collected dozens of such stories. He asks Aleksey, 'What can expiate the sufferings of innocent children?' If the world is so imperfect, God could not have created it. Therefore, He is absent. This sort of talk depresses Aleksey deeply and when Ivan asks whether those villains should be killed, Aleksey answers in a hard exhale, 'Yes'.

Aleksey's 'yes' sounds like some sort of permission for Ivan, which he was afraid to give to himself. However, Aleksey pulls himself together and protests against Ivan's ideas and his own 'yes'. He asks the brother how he can live with 'such hell in his soul and head'. Ivan goes into his shell and continues ironically, that he will reach his thirties and then he'll follow in his father's footsteps, a way in which 'everything is allowed', all nasty things can be done as there is no punishment. Ivan reproaches Aleksey who neither understands nor accepts him.

The 3rd Step: Being in the unwillingness to think and understand

After that conversation, Ivan felt 'an intolerable melancholy'. He could not understand the cause. 'Melancholy is like darkness and I have no strength to detect what I want. The only way out is to not think'. Everything became clearer when he met Smerdyakov. Ivan felt disgust towards Smerdyakov as he found too much vanity in him, though Ivan had regular conversations with the servant, having been seduced with Smerdyakov's high interest and high regard for him. Ivan was especially irritated by Smerdyakov's behaviour, hinting that they had been acting in conspiracy with each other.

Smerdyakov and Ivan have a strange talk in which the servant advises Ivan to visit the village Chermashna (the Karamazovs' ownership). Then, he hints to Ivan that in his absence, he may have a long, epileptic stupor, and that at this time, Dmitry may come and kill the father for money. Of course, he will not be able to fight back because he is ill. He then begins describing the murder in the smallest of details.

Ivan listened attentively to Smerdyakov though he was awfully angry with him. He even wanted to hit him, but he resisted his urge. Ivan really

didn't understand why Smerdyakov sent him to Chermashna. Then suddenly and unexpectedly, he told Smerdyakov that tomorrow he would leave for Moscow. Later, he wondered for what reason he had said it. Ivan returned home in a convulsive state 'laughing but not from fun'. It looked as if Ivan did not take seriously possible threats to his father and brother, whose impulsive emotional moves could irreversibly change his life. Why?

Ivan treated Smerdyakov contemptuously and evaluated his mental abilities as miserable. However, Ivan had propensity to self-deception. Therefore, he could not admit that Smerdyakov had invented the scheme. That was the servant's plan and it was very obvious from his detailed speech. It was strange, why clever Ivan didn't understand the direction of Smerdyakov's thoughts.

The fact of the matter is that Ivan did not completely 'not understand'. If he recognized that Smerdyakov told the truth, he would automatically admit his doubtless intellectual ability. In this case, he should ask that 'terrible' question: 'What must I go to Chermashna for?' The answer, possibly, was not in Ivan's favour! He could deceive his mind but not his heart, which knew more about him than he exposed to his own mind. This is why he felt the strongest alarm and excitement: from 'running into fury' to 'shaking by spasm' or 'nervous laughter'. During those minutes, he really wanted to run away, away from his own desires to which, as he had told Aleksey, he 'reserves full freedom'.

The 4th Step: Being in the process of realising guilt

After his talk with Smerdyakov, Ivan went home where he met his father but could not hide his hatred for him. His father wanted to tell him something, but Ivan shouted at him. It was strange as Ivan always seemed to be cold. Ivan did not sleep that night, he was too excited, his train of thought had no certain course. He felt that he had 'lost all his ways'. He did not understand how he had gotten into that box, nor did he understand how to get out of it.

He hated Smerdyakov but could not figure out the reason why. 'That night, his heart was embraced by an inexplicable and humiliating shyness, which caused loss of his physical strengths. He had a headache and his head was spinning. The weight of hatred pressed against his heart as if he was going to take revenge upon someone'.

That night Ivan committed 'the act' and deep in his heart he considered it to be the vilest point in his life. He came out onto the stairs two times secretly so as to overhear what his father was doing, how he was moving, and how he was breathing. He tried to imagine how things were going for him, how he looked, awaiting a treasured knock (from Grusha, his and Dmitry's love). He did not hate his father at that moment but rather he felt nothing but the strongest curiosity.

It would be desirable to analyze this moment. What can be shameful

and vile in coming out onto the stairs and listening to another person's movements? It appears as a quite normal act but it depends on the action's purpose. Ivan's experiences may relate to some people who have a dying relative at their house. This man has been ill for a long time; he is dying slowly and painfully in his bed. The people around him are nearly dying with him and they are involuntarily waiting for his death, even not waiting, but wishing (his death will set them free). All the relatives of the dying man, one by one (secretly from each other), are listening attentively, peering, searching for the signs of death coming nearer and nearer. It is shameful to think of it, especially to speak of it. Anyone would be ashamed for the rest of his or her life. Then, when everything comes to an end, most of the relatives comfort themselves, saying 'I did everything I could, nothing could be changed anyhow'.

Ivan feels awfully exhausted and tries to fall asleep. He sleeps soundly and without dreams. Early in the morning, he finds an unexpected inflow of 'extraordinary energy' in himself. He starts collecting suitcases hastily. Doing this, he notices some pleasure of having no obstacles to his sudden departure. Just then he realizes that last night he had no plans for departure in his mind.

Just then, the father comes in and asks to make a trip to Chermashna. Ivan tries to refuse and suddenly shouts spitefully grinning, 'Do you, yourself, push me out to this damned Chermashna, well?'

Leaving, he unexpectedly appeals to Smerdyakov, 'You see ... I'm going to Chermashna'. And the answer was 'It is curious to speak to a clever man'. Later, Ivan repeated these words in his memory over and over again. On the road, he tries to distract himself from his thoughts but he cannot. Suddenly he sinks into the flow of emotions caused by a sharp question: why did Smerdyakov answer the way he did? And just then he found his thoughts wandering in other directions.

After Chermashna, Ivan went to Moscow. In the carriage, he thought that everything was over, 'away with that old world', 'forward with a new world', and 'without looking back'. But instead of delight, he felt gloom, and his 'heart was full of such grief that he had never felt before'. He spent the entire night in this manner. In the morning, it suddenly (again suddenly) came to him: 'I am a villain!' he whispered to himself. This time Ivan knew this about himself for certain. But how can he live on with such a realization?

The 5th Step: Being in conflict ('I do not want to feel guilty and I do not want remorse')

Ivan returns to town and secretly visits Dmitry in prison. Secretly from everybody, especially from Aleksey. Ivan persistently tries to convince Dmitry to pretend to be the madman in order to get the verdict of 'not guilty', insists on escape, and gives a large sum of money (40,000 rubles) to leave for America. According to Dmitry's words, he 'does not ask but

orders', 'he wants it hysterically', and 'he has no doubt in my obedience'. Ivan's behaviour is similar to 'hiding of traces'. More than anything, Ivan is afraid of seeing Aleksey. For a long time, Aleksey has been standing 'as his conscience' in Ivan's eyes. For this reason Ivan avoids him as he wishes to avoid feelings of shame.

The 6th Step: Being in a state of hallucinations

One more turning point is the inevitable meeting with Aleksey and their conversation on the street. Ivan is irritated but he asks his brother in a low voice and with a simple-hearted curiosity, 'Do you know, Aleksey Fyodorovich, how people go mad?' 'And can you watch yourself going mad?' Every return to the theme of their father's murder in their talk irritates Ivan and makes him rough. Aleksey protests desperately against blaming Dmitry as the murderer and Ivan suddenly (again suddenly) asks in a cold manner, 'And who do you think is the murderer?' As he is sure that Smerdyakov could not do that, Ivan 'furiously' demands from Aleksey the answer 'who'?

Aleksey answers, 'It is not you who has killed our father'. After those words, Ivan falls into a stupor and is confused. Ivan looks into his brother's eyes for a long time and then he grasps Aleksey to his chest and shakes him. He insists on Aleksey's answer, whether he was in his room and saw 'him'. By 'him' Ivan means somebody unknown appearing before him, tormenting him, as he really believes that Aleksey has seen him. Aleksey repeats again and again, 'not you!' Then Ivan pulls himself together and tells Aleksey in a cold and angry manner that he does not wish to know him anymore and their ways have gone apart forever.

Aleksey has hit the centre of Ivan's spiritual unrest and was indignant. How could Aleksey suspect Ivan in such thoughts? Ivan does not allow doing it even for himself. It is taboo. Certainly, this unknown person comes and torments him too and most likely accuses him but cannot get rid of him. But he *can* get rid of Aleksey.

This unknown creature appeared when Ivan arrived from Moscow, visited Dmitry, and 'wanted hysterically' his brother to agree to runaway. Now it is only a hallucination. This is not psychosis in its full form.

The 7th Step: Being in denial of guilt

Ivan goes to Smerdyakov to find out who 'actually killed the father, if not Dmitry'. But Smerdyakov knows well what Ivan 'actually' has come for. Ivan feels considerably worse after this first meeting.

And Ivan visits Smerdyakov the second time and comes back from him depressed again, furious, and even more confused than before. Each time Smerdyakov gives him the idea that it is Ivan who is the murderer. Ivan gets angry but still does not convict himself of this role. He insists on evidence.

The 8th Step: Being in unbearable despair: escape

Ivan goes to Smerdyakov for a third time. On the road he walks heavily, he feels very badly. He meets a drunken man and he feels a sharp disgust toward him. The man loses his balance, leans on Ivan who pushes him and the drunken man falls and lies, fainted. 'He will freeze to death,' notes Ivan, who keeps trudging along in his burdensome feelings.

It is reminiscent of, that which that he had done to his father. He wished his death but he controlled himself up to the moment when the man fell on him and his father, ostensibly 'pushed him out to damned Chermashna all on his own'. If not for those casual circumstances, he most likely would go on living with a secret bitterness about his unperformed vengeance. In both cases of death threats, he stepped aside in an indifferent manner as if he had said, 'Let it be so, it does not concern me.' He used the same logic with both the father and the drunkard.

At last, Smerdyakov owns up that he is the formal killer and Dmitry is not. But he still affirms that Ivan is the main murderer. Ivan does not pretend, but really does not understand what he is particularly guilty of, but in spite of this, Smerdyakov continues accusing him.

'I always could drive you into a corner, having found out how strongly you desired the death of your parent, and here is my word that all people would believe, and it would be a shame to you for all your life' says he. 'So do I have it, do I have this desire, do I?' – mumbled Ivan (he still cannot admit his role in this crime). He asks Smerdyakov about the details of the murder.

Listening to the details of the murder, Ivan was rather indifferent until the words about Dmitry: 'everything has happened so that he will surely be accused'. Here Ivan became puzzled and recognized in 'a terrible melancholy' that Smerdyakov was much more clever than he had originally thought.

Ivan still made excuses for himself, shouting in irritation. Then suddenly, he decided to go to the court and tell everything there! And he would take Smerdyakov with him! 'Ivan declared it solemnly and energetically and one could see his sparkling look as he said – it will be so'.

Leaving Smerdyakov, he feels strong weariness but some joy began to light him up! He felt iron firmness in himself. No more hesitations! He has made the decision and will see it to the end! At this very moment, his feet get onto that drunkard whom Ivan has pushed before. Ivan grasps him, drags on himself, and finds help. He generously gives money 'of his own expense', asking people to take care of him and call a doctor for this man. He is very satisfied with himself. He thinks: 'If my decision about tomorrow was not so firm ... I would pass by and wouldn't care'. He is happy to be capable of self-control no matter if only a few silly people believe that he has lost his mind.

Near his house, Ivan asks himself, 'Should I go to the public prosecutor

today to explain everything?’ Ivan was still on a wave in euphoria for his deed and is ready for action. Somewhere on the edge of consciousness he knew that under scrutiny he would not be able to look like a hero who saved his brother from penal servitude. Smerdyakov would surely vilify him. Ivan’s repentance was not real. Forced into a corner by incontrovertible evidence of his guilt, he, for a time, pleads guilty although he does not feel as such.

Ivan’s answer (and it was ‘suddenly’ again) changed his entire life: – ‘Tomorrow, all together’. In this moment, his mood changes and almost all his joy and happiness vanish. ‘When he enters the room, something like ice touches his heart sharply, as though a reminiscence or more truly, a reminder of something painful and disgusting is hanging over him in this room now; now and in the past’.

Sometimes it seemed to him that he was delirious. Ivan tries not to sleep but then feels worse. He starts looking around, staring at everything. ‘At last his eyes were fixed steadily on one point. Ivan was grinning but at the same time, the pain of anger spread over his face. He was sitting for a long time in his place, supporting his head with both hands and mowing his eyes on the same point on the sofa standing on the opposite side. It seemed that there was something that irritated him, an uncertain thing that disturbed and tormented his heart’ The next day, Ivan had gone completely to psychosis, that is to say, he had run away to madness.

Being in delirium, he comes to the court where he tries to convict himself of the murder of his father, but nobody believes him. For people surrounding him, he is a seriously sick person – a madman.

Dostoevsky notes that Ivan resists to his madness ‘persistently’. ‘With the strongest will and efforts, he could delay for a while his illness whilst dreaming, certainly, to overcome it absolutely’. He knows that he is unhealthy, ‘he denied his illness with disgust at this time, in these coming fatal minutes of his life when it was necessary to have his own face, to state his word daringly and resolutely and to justify his name before himself’. Does it mean that he wanted not to be a healthy man, a gallant, right and good fellow but only to look like this? He hated to look crushed by his guilt, a sick, weak ‘villain’.

There are several questions, which, in our opinion are important, but they are not the focus of this article. These are the questions of support in one’s life and the role one’s environment play in driving them to madness. That is, how could Ivan be saved and which of his loved ones could have done it?

‘What is happening in the world of mentally ill people is not meaningless,’ said R.D. Laing (2005). L. Binswanger (1999), attempts to seek an understanding of the world of a mentally ill person. Laing (2005) raises the question of what mental illness means in a person’s life. Dostoevsky

is interesting because he gives an example of such an answer. He shows that the answer can be found only in life of the specific individual. Dostoevsky's (2009) material helps reflect the role of psychopathology in the life of a person. Dostoevsky (2009) does not describe psychopathology, but rather, he tells a story. He describes the emergence of psychopathology in Ivan Karamazov's life. As a result of his description, it is clear that psychopathology in Ivan's life plays some role. That is, it served to ensure an escape from a situation that Ivan couldn't handle; a situation that was perceived by him as unsolvable, in which he was unable to look 'good'.

Instead of a conclusion

It seems that, often, one has a greater need for a lawyer when talking with one's own self than when talking to a psychiatrist or a policeman. To bear guilt for oneself means to reconcile and to reconcile can only be done by a true man who chooses 'to be'.

Responsibility can only be taken by a man who **is**. Responsibility automatically means the possibility of being guilty and a courageous recognition of this possibility. Responsibility, if to speak with M. Bakhtin's (1986) language, is 'non-alibi', i.e. in contrast to alibi. If I believe myself to be responsible, I do not search for arguments of my non-participation. Meanwhile, each of us is, to some extent, inclined to avoid responsibility, tending to postpone an accusatory conversation with one's own conscience and to calm ourselves with delays. It is especially easy for us when there are 'participators' (escape) who, justifying us, justify themselves.

There is an expression: *explain away* – 'to be justified, find a pretext, a trick' in English. M. Mamardashvili (1997) translates it as the noun – *the explain-away*. For example, you commit an act that goes against your conscience. The voice of your conscience sounds out but not wishing to listen to it, you act as if you cannot understand what you have heard. Then, having sincerely convinced yourself that you 'knew nothing' and consequently did not understand the degree of your mistake, you apply for your alibi. You can find your alibi, but your responsibility is not excused.

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Psychosis as a Mechanism For Coping With Existential Distress

Grant S. Shields

Abstract

This paper attempts to explain occurrences of psychosis through a new understanding: as a coping mechanism. This hypothesis seems to have broad explanatory power. Some qualitative evidence also supports this understanding. This paper concludes that it is possible to understand psychotic episodes as mechanisms for coping with existential distress.

Keywords

Existential Psychology; Psychosis; Psychotic Disorders; Coping.

1. Introduction

The most puzzling part of psychotic disorders is their etiology. While a variety of hypotheses offer potential explanations, most individuals today accept the theory of psychosis known as the dopamine hypothesis (Howes & Kapur, 2009). This hypothesis posits that a biological malfunction – a dysregulation of dopaminergic activity – leads to psychosis. Precisely why this biological malfunction occurs is unknown – though most agree that genetic and environmental influences play a role – and exactly how this dopaminergic dysregulation leads to psychosis is not agreed upon (Howes & Kapur, 2009). However, while pragmatically useful, purely biological definitions and treatments are not entirely satisfactory. No clear objective, biological marker has emerged with which to identify psychosis (*DSM-IV-TR*). In addition, biological treatments of psychosis are somewhat ineffective: the efficacy of antipsychotic drugs to reduce psychotic symptoms and prevent relapse is only 41% (Leucht, Arbter et al., 2009; Leucht, Corves et al., 2009). The failure of these treatments leaves open a question: are psychotic disorders more than purely biological?

Existential psychology may provide an answer to this question. Existential psychology holds that mortality, responsibility, isolation, uncertainty or groundlessness, and a need for meaning are integral to being human, and as humans, we must face and accept these realities (Yalom, 1980). Indeed, recent research suggests that these existential issues are so profoundly important that we anchor our entire lives around them (Hirsh, 2010). Nevertheless, facing and dealing with these realities can be a painful and overwhelming experience in itself. Many individuals, therefore, avoid dealing with these realities until confronted with them in a boundary situation

– that is, any abrupt or intrusive event that immediately confronts an individual with his or her existential issues (Yalom, 1980). Because these issues are so important, existential psychotherapists see the avoidance of these issues as the cause of psychopathology (Yalom, 1980). If this were true, what would happen when an individual could no longer avoid these issues, but the extreme, overwhelming emotional distress caused by facing these issues prompted that individual to continue to attempt to avoid them? What would happen if someone avoided dealing with these issues when they were unavoidable? At this point, a break from reality would necessarily occur. This paper proposes that, in this light, one sees psychotic episodes for what they may be: a mechanism for coping with existential distress – a way of being that allows an individual to escape existential realities when that individual cannot avoid these things otherwise.

A note on typical coping mechanisms for existential distress is in order before proceeding further. Most individuals mollify existential distress in two ways: through a worldview that provides hope of literal immortality, or through the symbolic immortality of self-esteem garnered from exceeding societal expectations (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). Terror management theory has shown that these methods of coping have a robust and ubiquitous effect on easing the severity of existential distress. Of note for this paper's hypothesis, research has repeatedly shown that broad measures of religiosity and prayer have significant negative correlations with psychoticism – with small to moderate correlation coefficients (Francis & Wilcox, 1996; Lewis, Francis, & Enger, 2004; Roman & Lester, 1999). However, not all individuals can find relief through these ways of coping. For instance, some individuals may find no comfort from religion or religious beliefs. Additionally, an unresolved feeling of doubt and uncertainty about one's beliefs, which accompanies many religious believers and some consider an integral part of faith itself (Tillich, 1957), can have profoundly negative effects on a person's health and ability to cope with stress (Krause & Wulff, 2004). Moreover, self-esteem is not necessarily stable, and even high self-esteem can, when threatened, increase rates of psychopathological behaviors (Borton, Crimmins, Ashby, & Ruddiman, 2012). Therefore, both conventional ways of coping with existential distress are not always sufficient, and extreme situations may render both of these methods impotent, necessitating an extreme way to cope.

It is important to note that the hypothesis outlined in this paper is biopsychosocial. While most acknowledge that existential crises can occur for psychological or social reasons, this paper is careful to note that certain brain regions play a crucial role in mediating existential distress. As this paper will later explain, deficits in these brain regions entail a diminished ability to mollify existential distress. As such, individuals with these deficits may suffer a psychotic break when individuals without these deficits would

not. However, this understanding of psychosis is not purely biological: these deficits are not necessary for a psychotic episode to occur, as severity of existential distress can overwhelm any individual.

In the next section, this paper offers a brief historical perspective on this hypothesis to better illustrate how this hypothesis is similar and how it is different from other hypotheses. Following that, this paper then explores the explanatory power of this new hypothesis. Next, this paper addresses the traditional, biological model of psychosis. Included in this section is a novel way to understand the efficacy of antipsychotics and a discussion of the predispositions to psychosis. In the following section, this paper examines the supporting evidence for the hypothesis that psychosis often is a mechanism for coping with existential distress – such as studies of individuals who have fully recovered from psychosis. After the evidence for this hypothesis, this paper discusses some limitations of this theoretical perspective. Finally, this paper summarizes the implications of the research discussed herein and offers suggestions for further research.

2. Review

2.1 Historical Perspectives

Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland (1956) formulated what is perhaps the most famous psychological hypothesis of schizophrenia — the double-bind hypothesis. This hypothesis proposed that psychotic disorders arose out of a history of receiving constant conflicting messages from persons in one's family. The researchers formulated this hypothesis deductively from what most researchers thought about psychotic disorders at that time (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1963). However, this hypothesis failed to find empirical support, and after only a decade of research, most acknowledged this hypothesis was inconsistent with the literature (Schuham, 1967). It was around the time of this recognized failure that the one researcher made the first formal articulation of the dopamine hypothesis of schizophrenia (Rossum, 1966). Contrary to the double-bind hypothesis, the dopamine hypothesis rested on a foundation of empirical evidence. Various lines of research, such as the mechanism of action of neuroleptic drugs and amphetamine-induced psychosis, indicated that dopaminergic neurotransmission played a crucial role in producing schizophrenic symptoms. These strong data ultimately solidified this hypothesis as the foundation for an entire generation of researchers investigating the etiology of schizophrenia (Baumeister & Francis, 2002).

In the wake of the success of the dopamine hypothesis of schizophrenia, speculative hypotheses failing to proffer empirical support received little attention in research. The existential psychotherapists Irvin Yalom (1980) and Rollo May (1996) each put forward a hypothesis speculating on the etiology of psychosis from a phenomenological or psychological level.

Yalom thought that psychosis might arise when death anxiety overwhelms an individual. Similarly, May proposed that psychotic episodes could occur to cope with anxiety when it is unmanageable by any other method. The hypothesis proposed herein is similar to that of both Yalom and May, but it has nuanced differences. The proposed hypothesis is similar to Yalom's in that it views existential issues as the underlying prompt of psychotic episodes. It is different, however, because it specifies how this overwhelming distress might prompt a psychotic break – namely, if existential distress becomes unavoidable but unmanageable and a psychotic episode can function as a dissociative mechanism for avoiding that distress. The proposed hypothesis is also similar to May's because it views psychosis as a dissociative coping mechanism that arises in response to distress, but it differs in that it does not assert that a general type of distress could prompt these breaks – instead, it specifies existential distress in particular. The reason for this difference is that we do not anchor our lives around anxiety in general, whereas – as discussed in Section 1 – we do for existential issues, and overwhelming generalized anxiety therefore does not cause the same fragmentation of the self that existential distress does. The proposed hypothesis can thus be seen as a synthesis of elements from each of these historical perspectives. However, this hypothesis does not view these psychological processes as operating independently of biological factors; these psychological and existential factors work closely with the structural or functional integrity of the brain in producing psychotic episodes.

2.2 The Explanatory Power of the Hypothesis

2.2.1 The symptomatic manifestation of psychosis. Psychosis has a variety of previously unexplained peculiarities, and this paper will now explore the application of the hypothesis proposed herein to these peculiarities. To begin, positive symptoms and negative symptoms occur together frequently in psychotic individuals (*DSM-IV-TR*). Despite their commonality of occurrence, the reason these seemingly opposite symptoms manifest in tandem is currently unexplained. Viewing psychosis as a coping mechanism allows one to see positive symptoms as part of the coping process: positive symptoms are the construction of an alternate reality that allows the individual to escape from reality as it actually is. Similarly, negative symptoms are reflective of a withdrawal from reality. Positive and negative symptoms – rather than being dichotomous – work in tandem to allow the psychotic individual to avoid the issues that reality brings when these issues are otherwise unavoidable. Additionally, the reason for the occurrence of one particular type of positive symptom – grandiose delusions – continues to elude researchers (McKay & Kinsbourne, 2010), but this hypothesis seems able to explain its presence. This hypothesis explains the occurrence of

grandiose delusions as being an artificial instillation of meaning. These delusions involve being a part of, or used by, something greater or more meaningful than one's self, and they instill meaning to a person's life that otherwise is meaningless. Consistent with this view of grandiose delusions, researchers have found that psychotic individuals experiencing grandiose delusions have a higher self-esteem and mood than psychotic individuals without grandiose delusions (Smith et al., 2006). We imbue everyday events with meaning in response to existential threats (Landau, Kosloff, & Schmeichel, 2011), and grandiose delusions may be an extreme example of this. Additionally, the symptomatic manifestation of psychosis does not relegate itself to psychotic individuals. Instead, psychotic symptoms exist on a continuum even in healthy individuals (Stefanis et al., 2002). This, too, seems to be explicable if psychosis is a way to cope with existential distress – as psychosis would be quantitatively, rather than qualitatively, different from normal.

One final aspect of the manifestation of psychosis that the proposed hypothesis can explain is the fact that most psychotic episodes occur in late adolescence or the early college years. There have been proposed explanations for this fact relating to an apparent psychosis-prone psychological state of adolescents (Harrop & Trower, 2001). The hypothesis proposed herein appears to be able to add dimension to the explanation of this fact. A recent meta-analysis of data from terror management theory showed that the fear of death has its strongest effect during the college years (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). This could be because individuals during this time-period are now capable of understanding their own mortality but do not yet have a solidified worldview to buffer existential distress, leading to an increased fear of death. If individuals at this stage of life experience a heightened state of existential distress when confronted with distressing stimuli, this appears to explain why adolescents or young adults exhibit traits in common with psychosis-prone or psychotic individuals. The hypothesis that psychosis is a mechanism for coping with existential distress thus appears to be able to explain a variety of aspects of the symptomatic manifestation of psychosis.

2.2.2 Aspects of delusions This hypothesis can explain another aspect of psychosis: psychotic individuals do not choose realistic explanations for their experiences (Freeman et al., 2004). If the explanations chosen by psychotic individuals were more realistic, then the problem of reality would continue to intrude on an individual that cannot deal with reality. Because of this, psychotic individuals may choose unrealistic explanations for their experiences to avoid the otherwise unavoidable implications of their experiences. This hypothesis potentially explains an additional aspect of delusions. Psychotic delusions oftentimes relate to the psychotic individual's life problems or goals (Jakes, Rhodes, & Issa, 2004). This fact is presumably

consistent with the hypothesis proposed herein. These delusions may be confabulations that allow an individual to handle any aspect of reality that necessarily intrudes into their experience (McKay & Kinsbourne, 2010). If an individual's psychotic state alone is not enough to bear the weight of all issues pressing down on them, distorting the truth of the realities that continue to press down would help alleviate their suffering. If one is able to confabulate to the degree that the delusion fulfills a given goal or relieves a given problem, then that delusion thereby completely alleviates that part of their suffering.

Delusions may thus serve the dual purpose of generally allowing an individual to avoid reality as well as potentially helping an individual cope with a particularly stressful issue not otherwise avoided. Consistent with this conceptualization, a variety of traumatic existential events prior to the onset of first-episode psychosis predict the content of delusions and hallucinations for that psychotic break (Raune, Bebbington, Dunn, & Kuipers, 2006). Furthermore, this hypothesis can explain the fact that psychotic individuals hold to their delusions with a greater degree of certainty than they do their regular beliefs (Freeman et al., 2004). Delusions play a key role in allowing these individuals to cope, and since these beliefs must hold if an individual's psychosis is to allow an avoidance of reality, psychotic individuals might hold these beliefs with great certainty. The hypothesis that psychosis is an existential coping mechanism thus appears able to account for a variety of facts about delusions.

2.2.3 The dispositions of psychotic individuals This hypothesis therefore may explain the symptomatic manifestation and content of psychosis. However, one might extend the explanatory power of this hypothesis further still: to the dispositions held by psychotic individuals towards their psychosis. Those suffering from psychosis exhibit one of two dispositions toward their experience: wanting to rid themselves of reality and their experience at all costs, or having an absolute certainty of their experience as veridical (Spinelli, 2001). This hypothesis proposes that these two dispositions are reflective of the ability of a given psychotic episode to alleviate the weight of the issues facing an individual. Psychotic breaks that do not entirely allow psychotic individuals to avoid dealing with the issues that prompted their psychosis would leave these individuals no way to avoid reality – though they desire to. Therefore, individuals in this state would want to rid themselves of reality and their experience however necessary – if their psychosis is, indeed, an attempted escape from an unbearable reality. Alternatively, for psychotic breaks that do truly allow individuals to avoid dealing with the issues that prompted their psychosis, these individuals would cling to their psychosis with certainty, as their psychosis is what permits them to cope with the crushing distress that prompted their episode. This hypothesis may therefore

account for the dispositions of psychotic individuals towards their experience.

The explanatory power of this new hypothesis in explaining the psychological aspects of psychotic disorders thus seems broad and forceful. However, broad explanatory power is not sufficient to establish the truth of a hypothesis — none can call a scientific hypothesis such without proffering evidence in support of it or addressing data that seem to support other hypotheses. It is to the dominant hypothesis of psychosis that this paper now turns.

2.3 Addressing the Dominant Hypothesis

2.3.1 The biological model of psychosis The biological model of psychosis proposes that a dysregulation in neurotransmission involving dopamine, due to biological factors, somehow induces a psychotic break (Howes & Kapur, 2009). Though a variety of hypotheses exist that purport to explain how this dopaminergic dysregulation causes psychosis, none has emerged as satisfactory. Nevertheless, the biological model is highly successful, and evidence for it is not shortcoming. Therefore, any model of psychosis that purports to explain its occurrence must address the evidence supporting the biological model of psychosis.

2.3.2 Biological predispositions to psychosis In addressing the evidence supporting the biological model of psychosis, this paper will first discuss biological risk factors for developing a psychotic disorder. One classic and commonly discussed risk factor for psychosis is a head injury (Symonds, 1937). Although there are conflicting data (cf. David & Prince, 2005), there is good reason to believe that a traumatic brain injury does indeed predispose individuals to psychosis (Molloy, Conroy, Cotter, & Cannon, 2011). However, why and how traumatic brain injuries bring about the occurrence of psychosis is unknown. This paper proposes that this predisposition is due to damage of the lateral prefrontal cortex (IPFC) or connectivity to it. The IPFC is responsible for suppressing unwanted thoughts and memories (Anderson et al., 2004). A consequence of this is that impairing the IPFC entails a diminished ability to avoid dealing with unwanted thoughts and memories. Therefore, an individual who has incurred a head injury that damaged or impaired his or her IPFC cannot avoid dealing with unwanted thoughts or issues to the same degree that a healthy individual can. Because of that, when faced with existentially distressing issues, an individual with an injured IPFC who chooses to try to avoid these issues would suffer psychotic breaks when a healthy individual faced with the same issues would not — as the weight of these issues would not press down as hard on healthy individuals who can repress them. Concurrent with this idea, reduced functioning in this area of the brain seems to increase rates of psychopathology (Anderson & Levy, 2009). Indeed, one difference commonly observed in psychotic

individuals is a functional reduction in IPFC activity (e.g., Andreasen et al., 1997; Dolan et al., 1993). Data therefore support the notion that head injuries may predispose individuals to psychosis because they hinder an individual from repressing unwanted thoughts.

One can thus possibly explain the predisposition to developing psychotic disorders from head injuries without reference to the purely biological model, but this is not the only predisposition that a new hypothesis needs to address. Other predispositions exist as well, including genetic abnormalities (Hall et al., 2006) and prenatal infections (Brown, 2006). However, the reason for the association between genetic abnormalities or prenatal infections and psychosis is unclear (Brown, 2006). It should be noted that these predispositions do not predetermine psychosis; many individuals who develop psychotic disorders did not have these predispositions. Perhaps, rather than these predispositions affecting the developing brain in a way that directly produces psychosis, these genetic or prenatal influences affect the developing brain in a way that alters cognition. These predispositions, then, would not be seen predispositions towards psychosis directly, but instead as predispositions to aberrant cognitive styles – thereby altering how and individual processes existential distress. Support for this view comes from a study that examined the link between psychosis and giftedness (Karlsson, 1970). This study found that close relatives of psychotic individuals had significantly increased probabilities for high achievement in scholastic and artistic areas. More forcefully, though, research has discovered that the same genetic abnormalities that predispose individuals to psychosis also predispose individuals with a high intellectual ability to creative achievement (Kéri, 2009). Alternatively, these genetic predispositions produce structural diminutions in the IPFC (Harms et al., 2010). Because these genetic abnormalities – and perhaps prenatal infections – decrease the functioning of the IPFC, these genetic abnormalities thereby partially prohibit affected individuals from repressing unwanted issues and thus increase the severity of any existential distress that they may have. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that these predispositions affect the brain in ways that do not directly provoke psychosis but instead alter cognitive styles, which then intensify existential distress.

While one can account for the aforementioned predispositions by noting the role of the IPFC in repressing unwanted thoughts, one cannot account for another predisposition to psychosis in this way. Drug use – particularly cannabis use – is associated with an increased risk of developing psychosis (Moore et al., 2007). This hypothesis, however, notes that drug use is often an attempt by an individual to escape from reality. Rather than drug use being the cause of psychosis, then, drug use would be a symptom of an inability to deal with reality as it is – which is a clear precursor to psychosis on this view. Therefore, while there are a variety of predispositions that

seem to provide evidence for the purely biological model of psychosis, the hypothesis proposed in this paper may be able to explain these predispositions as well.

2.3.3 The efficacy of antipsychotic drugs The purely biological model of psychosis does not receive the majority of its strength from citing predispositions to psychosis; instead, the efficacy of antipsychotic drugs is the driving force behind the power of this model. Antipsychotic drugs work by modulating dopaminergic neurotransmission, and by doing so, they provide powerful evidence for the dopamine hypothesis of psychosis (Howes & Kapur, 2009). It is worth noting, again, that the efficacy of antipsychotic drugs is very limited – around 41% (Leucht, Arbter, Engel, Kissling, & Davis, 2009). Most individuals who experience symptom relief eventually relapse, and the difference in efficacy of antipsychotic drugs and placebo disintegrates over time (Leucht et al., 2009). Additionally, overall recovery rates are much better for those suffering from psychotic disorders who elect not to take antipsychotic medication than they are for those who do take antipsychotic medication (Harrow & Jobe, 2007). Furthermore, one randomized trial found that individuals with psychosocial support, but not antipsychotic medication, had better outcomes than individuals provided with both psychosocial support and antipsychotic medication (Carpenter, McGlashan, & Strauss, 1977; cf. Bola & Mosher, 2003). Therefore, it is not obvious that antipsychotic drugs represent the best treatment for psychotic individuals; indeed, they may even do more harm than good (Whitaker, 2004). However, the fact that antipsychotic drugs are efficacious at all in treating psychosis demands an explanation.

This paper's hypothesis – that psychosis might function as a mechanism for coping with existential distress – explains the efficacy of antipsychotic drugs by their ability to help a patient avoid existentially distressing issues. Antipsychotic drugs contribute to a dose-related overall cognitive deficit (Elie et al., 2010). Antipsychotic drugs also cause an overall reduction in brain volume (Ho, Andreasen, Ziebell, Pierson, & Magnotta, 2011), which reflects this overall cognitive deficit. After a lengthy review of the evidence for and against the dopamine hypothesis, one psychiatrist proposed that antipsychotics primarily work not by modifying dopamine but instead by inducing neurocognitive suppression, which diminishes the severity of psychotic symptoms (Moncrieff, 2009).

If these were all the data around the efficacy of antipsychotics, one could reasonably conclude that they work by cognitively reducing the severity of existential distress; however, there are more data. Recently, a neuroimaging study examined the neurological correlates of existential distress (Quirin et al., 2011). This study found that existential distress exceptionally increased activity in the amygdala, right caudate nucleus, and left anterior cingulate

cortex. If antipsychotic drugs ameliorated existential distress, one would expect to see either marked antagonism or reduced activity in each of these areas following antipsychotic administration, and, indeed, research confirms this expectation (Blasi et al., 2009; Chakos et al., 1994; Holcomb et al., 1996). Additionally, some antipsychotic drugs increase activity in the IPFC (Blasi et al., 2009). Therefore, not only do antipsychotic drugs reduce the severity of existential distress, some actually endow an individual with an increased ability to repress unwanted thoughts. Antipsychotic drugs also affect the brain in a variety of other ways, but they also have a variety of side effects not related to their efficacy. However, if the hypothesis outlined herein is true, the nature of the antipsychotic cure is temporary rather than permanent; the individual still has not dealt with the issues that prompted their psychotic break. This temporary nature may explain why antipsychotics increase the chronicity of psychosis: antipsychotics are simply another measure in avoiding the same issues that need resolved. To summarize, this paper explains the efficacy of antipsychotic drugs by their ability to reduce the neurocognitive severity of existential distress.

2.4 Supporting Evidence for the New Hypothesis

While there has not been research performed directly on the hypothesis proposed herein, there is still some justifying evidence. For instance, a qualitative study of those with psychotic disorders in Brazil revealed that existential needs ranked highest out of all their needs (Wagner & King, 2005). The needs for integrity of the self, autonomy, acceptance, love, spirituality, and especially meaning were more important to these individuals than their basic needs – the needs of food, water, and other basic necessities. This peculiar reversal of Maslow's hierarchy of needs is evidence for the hypothesis presented in this paper. Meeting these existential needs would be one of the most fundamental necessities in an individual suffering from psychosis; once these needs are met, a psychotic individual no longer needs to escape reality and can properly engage reality once again. Another piece of evidence for this hypothesis comes from qualitative studies on those who have fully recovered from psychosis, which found that creating a new self-narrative was integral to recovery (Roe & Davidson, 2005). The new narrative created by these recovered individuals allowed them the opportunity to regain a sense of self, to gain a degree of autonomy, and to create meaning from their experience. It therefore appears that addressing the existential is an integral aspect of recovery from psychotic disorders. Lastly, one researcher interviewed six individuals who suffered psychotic disorders and eventually attained full remission in a qualitative study (Williams, 2012). In this study, each of the individuals who suffered from psychosis incurred an actual or existential threat to the self just before their psychotic

break. Out of these individuals, two individuals experienced an actual threat to their lives, two experienced a profound sense of isolation, one experienced a feeling of living in a void, and one felt as if she was losing her sense of self. In each of their cases, these individuals all emerged, personally transformed, out of their psychotic state, which allowed them to overcome the distress of their existential crises. This process and personal transformation seemed to be what brought about the resolution of their psychotic disorders. These qualitative studies seem to lend support to the hypothesis that psychosis might be a way of coping with extreme existential distress, though confirmation of this hypothesis requires more research.

3. Limitations

While this hypothesis appears to have a fair amount of persuasiveness, it does suffer from some apparent limitations. The first of these limitations is that the relationship of the hypothesis proposed herein to amphetamine psychosis, psychotomimetics, psychosis resulting from sleep deprivation, and psychosis resulting from neurodegeneration to the hypothesis proposed herein is not currently delineated. However, these forms of psychosis are explainable given this theoretical perspective; this hypothesis sees biological factors working in tandem with psychological factors, and forcibly altering neurotransmission similar to match what occurs under existential distress may result in psychotic episodes. The second limitation of this hypothesis is that many individuals undergo existential crises without having a psychotic break. However, it may be that individuals who do not have a psychotic break do not attempt to avoid the existential issues they are facing; instead, they may accept these issues or deal with them. Again, though, this is speculation, and it does not easily lead to predictions for further research. A final possible limitation of this hypothesis is that it implicitly assumes that psychosis is a unitary phenomenon, potentially manifest in differing ways, but some argue that a single concept of psychosis ought to be abandoned for a pentagonal model (Os & Kapur, 2009; White, Harvey, Opler, & Lindenmayer, 1997). However, there is a lack of experimental evidence for a pentagonal model of psychosis (Gaag et al., 2006), and good evidence indicating that a unitary psychotic dimension underlies a pentagonal manifestation (Reininghaus, Priebe, & Bentall, 2012). This supposed limitation therefore does not actually appear to damage the credulity of this hypothesis.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

To recapitulate, the impact of existential issues on one's quality of life cannot be understated. Meaning, mortality, and relationships form the core of who we are as individuals. Because of this, when a crisis in these areas is provoked and apparently irreconcilable, some might wish to try to avoid these issues, though they cannot be avoided. The hypothesis that psychosis

is a way of being that allows an individual to avoid existential distress when it is otherwise unavoidable appears to have considerable explanatory power, few limitations, and a fair amount of supporting evidence. In addition, the purely biological model of psychosis does not seem to have enough evidence to command allegiance. As any scientific hypothesis, the hypothesis proposed in this paper has proposed experimental verifications. In a randomized trial of treatment for psychotic individuals, those treated with existential psychotherapy – especially a type of existential psychotherapy that provides an ontological ground for the resolution of existential issues, such as the one provided by Bretherton (2006) – should have significantly better outcomes than those treated with biological methods. Additionally, this hypothesis would predict that individuals prone to psychosis might exhibit a greater level of distress when presented with an existential threat. Research is currently being conducted on this prediction. Furthermore, this hypothesis also predicts that a group of individuals presented with existential threats, given an antipsychotic, and presented with another existential threat would show a greater decrease in fMRI reactivity to that second existential threat than would a group given either a placebo or an anxiolytic. This hypothesis seems strong enough to merit research, but until this hypothesis is tested, one cannot firmly hold this hypothesis as true. In all, though, the hypothesis proposed herein – that psychosis is a way for an individual to cope with otherwise intolerable existential distress – seems to be a coherent and cogent hypothesis, given the current data.

Grant Shields was a graduate of Simpson University where this research was conducted, and is currently a graduate student in UC Davis's Psychology Ph.D programme, studying the biological pathways through which stress affects self-regulation.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Why do we read what we read? Reading is a curiously random process which nevertheless has an underlying order that we often do not discover until later. We might think we know, but do we? Like life. A thread that weaves its way through many of the books in this issue is that of living with the consequences of choices and actions by oneself and by others. We begin this issue with an extended Essay Review which began life as a review of a single book but then grew into something much longer and more far reaching than a simple book review. Focusing on four separate and rather different books it is a meditation on the area of human experience encompassed by wrong doing, vengeance, remorse and forgiveness.

One of the most powerful and valuable things about existential ideas is that they are reflective of everyday life and as such are present in all areas of human endeavour including mass market fiction. Harry Potter was no stranger to wickedness and forgiveness and the next book is about the way philosophical themes are present in the Harry Potter series.

Although failure is an ever present if not compulsory part of human experience therapists are strangely reluctant to talk about their own failure. Refreshingly, the next book is about just this.

The theme is visited from a Buddhist direction in the next book that ponders a question that stays close to all reflective therapists when they encounter the utter otherness of the other and that is 'what do we think we are up to' and 'how do we know it?'

The theme of how we know what we think we know is of course a central issue in life as well as in research and the next review is of two books on phenomenological research.

Retirement is one of those things that inspires strong feelings, from eager anticipation to despair to denial and everything in between. Which may explain why it is under researched. The next book is about what awaits everyone who gets to the inevitable time of life when they stop work and they have to decide what they want to do with the time remaining.

Martin Adams

Wrong doing, vengeance, remorse and forgiveness

I began what has become a four book review while reading *If You Sit Very Still* by Marion Partington. Her account of surviving the murder of a loved one inspired an exploration of related topics such as wickedness, revenge, wrongdoing, betrayal, regret, and forgiveness; hence the other reviews here

of: *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay* by moral philosopher Mary Midgley, which includes analysis of existential thinking on this topic; another individual story in *How to survive the Titanic, or, The sinking of J. Bruce Ismay* by Frances Wilson and finally *The Psychology of Feeling Sorry: The Weight of the Soul* by psychologist Peter Randal.

If You Sit Very Still

Marion Partington. (2012). Bristol: Vala Publishing Co-operative.

In 1973, Marion Partington's 21 year old sister Lucy disappeared. Twenty years later they heard she had been tortured to death by Fred and Rosemary West and that finally 'they beheaded and dismembered her and stuffed her into a small hole, surrounded by leaking sewage pipes, head first, face down, still gagged... [her] flesh was trashed' (p 21).

This is about Partington's struggle to forgive the Wests in order to release herself from the murderous rages and wish for revenge for a crime most of us would consider unforgiveable. Through several chapters ranging from 'disappearance' and 'not knowing' to finally 'words of grace', she weaves the story through Lucy's poems and a series of dreams, the first when four months after disappearing Lucy returned and said 'I've been sitting in a water meadow near Grantham' adding with a smile

if you sit very still you can hear the sun move

(p 6)

Although a very particular story it does have insights that are more widely applicable and helpful. For example, the more common violent death of self-murder invariably leaves in its wake a hugely complex grieving challenge that includes the need to forgive the suicide person and oneself. The unresolved pain may continue down the generations, especially if not talked about and 'forgiven'. Realising this became one of Partington's motivations for pushing onwards – she worried about the effects on her three children of her unending grieving and stifled violent emotions.

She found help in the Quaker movement who say there is 'that of God in everyone' (p 39), and by immersion in Buddhist philosophy which sees evil as 'an enormous mistake made by the perpetrator' (p 109). She came to the view that all violence 'affects the rhythm of our shared humanity' (p 109) which resonates with Sartre's suggestion that what we do to others we do to ourselves and all humanity.

Key to gaining her freedom was facing her need to be forgiven for 'my own rotting pile of mistakes and woundings' (p 68) ranging from emotional cruelty and betrayal of loved ones to four abortions which had become a source of deep shame. She traces the antecedents of her 'violence' in the anger and dismay at her parents' divorce and later in Lucy's disappearance.

She imagines her paternal grandmother's suicide as an event that has cascaded down the family, its unspoken, unresolved pain causing further grief. Similarly her mother's stoical silence after the divorce which 'shores up pain into a solid place' and keeps everyone mute.

*it is not the dead that haunt us but the gaps left within us by
the secrets of others*

(p 79)

She goes through this introspection to begin understanding something of what led to her sister's death – that one 'mistake' can lead to another, a cycle of furious and mindless revenge set in motion and ending in something truly awful. Rosemary West was abducted from a bus stop and raped at 15. She was abused by her father, Fred West and his brother. She was 19 when she helped abduct Lucy Partington from a bus stop.

We may say Rosemary West still had choices to make, not every abused child goes on to commit such violence, but taking this view of how events unfolded helped Partington begin to make sense of things and find a way forward, much as therapy clients often want to go back and work it all out before moving on to new perspectives. As Partington frees herself, what to do next becomes the pressing issue. She participates as a 'victim' in a workshop with violent offenders and this leads on to working in prisons with the Forgiveness Project.

The paradoxical problem with forgiveness is that it is the truly unforgivable things that are hard to forgive and this is further complicated here where the question arises whether we can forgive something done to someone else. Is it ours to forgive? Living with the unforgiveable may be the only path possible for some.

Forgiveness is giving up all hope of a better past'

(p 26)

This idea is given to Partington by a woman whose daughter was murdered. It captures how forgiveness involves letting go of any claim we feel we have on the other, allowing their freedom, accepting the limits of our power to keep loved ones safe, realising that while we may 'forgive' someone they may never admit to wrongdoing or seek forgiveness. They may not let us go and so we have to release ourselves.

Partington ends this lyrical, thoughtful book with a letter to Rosemary West saying that through facing her own potential for violence she has learned compassion for the terrible suffering West's actions have caused herself and many others, and has forgiven her. West does not reply and asks the warders to block any more letters. But Partington now feels less powerless, more energised and freer to make full use of the time

she has left to make her own reparations.

Forgiveness? I can forgive too.

Why won't you be forgiven?

Lucy Partington (p 152)

Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay (Routledge Classics) 2nd Edition

Mary Midgley. (2001). London: Routledge.

Brief, dense and intellectually satisfying while also very readable and at times witty; Midgley's explorations range over a broad canvas encompassing the ideas of Sartre, Nietzsche, Freud, Jung and Darwin amongst others, using historical cases such as Hitler and Eichmann and literary figures like Iago (from Shakespeare's play *Othello*) and Milton's Satan to develop her investigations.

Her chapters, each with a helpful summary, discuss 'natural evil', responsibility, aggression, fate vs free will, 'selves and shadows', Freud's death wish and evil in evolution; despatching errors in immoralism, relativism, fatalism, subjectivism and determinism *en route*. As Steven Rose says on the back cover she is 'one of the sharpest critical pens in the West'.

Midgley says dismissing wicked people as 'mad' may mean little more than that we have given up the effort to understand. She argues for a common starting point in 'human nature' saying 'unless evil is to be seen as a mere outside enemy... it seems necessary to locate some of its sources in the unevenness of this original equipment... our specific [human] capacities and incapacities' (p 16).

In the case of wickedness she suggests the ordinary motives we all experience have narrowed down to a single overriding one and become an obsession (or addiction) while the rest of the character has atrophied so that the individual disintegrates and what follows is as likely to destroy the perpetrator as well as the victims. 'Self destruction is... [a] seemingly inevitable consequence of indulged resentment' (p 205). As with Hitler chasing Jews ever more obsessively towards his own destruction and loss of WW II.

We all have conflicting motivations and must find a way to balance our contrary impulses in order to have a sense of being a complete, integrated personality. Midgley describes this obsessed motive as a 'plan' for life where an ordinary motive has gained corrupting control.

With Iago she says 'crazy paranoid envy serving crazy paranoid pride' (p 152) have pushed aside all other motives including prudent self regard. Finally facing his accusers he refuses to speak. 'It has dawned on him that

he has nothing to say' (p 153) he has suddenly realised that his blind, obsessed malice has made him forget himself (in existential terms he is alienated from himself) and he has nothing left to live for. He is taken into custody declaring he will never talk about it. To do so would be an unbearable loss of dignity, 'pride being the centre of his life'. This analysis bears comparison, although we don't know their overriding motives, with Rosemary West's silence and Fred West's suicide in custody, unlike the moors murderer Ian Brady they finally have nothing to say.

Where a personality has begun to disintegrate, Midgley says the motives do not need to be adequate, since this is an assessment only relevant to a complete integrated personality. The motives here need only be obsessive or addictive. While it is useful to consider the badness of a bad motive, its negative aspects and what it lacks e.g. 'selfishness is not centrally excessive self-love, but indifference to others' (p 206) we will not understand wrongdoing unless we look for the 'positive' characteristics – the perceived advantage involved that set things in train. As can happen with clients where we may unearth their original project and perceived advantage of adopting a strategy early on that now severely restricts their life and spoils their relationships.

To sum earlier events as causes does not provide an explanation – as with Partington suggesting prior events as 'causes' of Rose West's behaviour – naming a precipitating cause does not give a motive for the act/s. Whereas if we name something like envy, as with Iago, we do have a sort of explanation for actions which may appear to have nothing in common until realising they all gratify some frustrated wish and can be summed as 'such things madden him' (p 147), to know what such things are we return to the life plan and his principle of interpretation. She rightly says this requires standing in their shoes which is especially hard where it is a motive we do not fully share. Those around Iago were notably unenvious (although capable of envy) and absorbed in their own concerns hence no one suspects him. He is a monomaniac and because such extreme onesidedness is unexpected in everyday life he goes undetected. This also bears passing resemblance to the case of the Wests who went undetected, living a 'normal' family life for years.

She explores a Freudian suggestion that Iago has a sexual passion for Othello and 'like many other persuasive psychopaths owes much of his success to being extremely disturbed sexually' (p 154) regarding others as not people but things to be 'manipulated, destroyed, or sexually devoured' (p 154). While accepting the truth in this argument she does not find it sufficient. Nor does she accept that Iago in the grip of his obsession is any longer truly a free agent rather he is enslaved to it.

Midgley is also interested in science and frequently uses examples from science and the animal world to help make a point, vividly and often very

entertainingly. Roger Scruton describes her as underrated and I think he is right. He says it may be partly because she has focused on the unfashionable (in academic circles) question of the nature of Man. I think we could usefully include her in existential studies as a critical friend with much to offer.

Her book is dense with an abundance of lines of thought and careful argument and counter argument and I can only give a brief insight into aspects of its contents here. I recommend it as a very good read. It extends existential thought more deeply into moral philosophy and although called a philosophical essay is as much a contribution to psychology. Importantly, it suggested new ways to think about my clients – representatives of the majority who like us make everyday ‘enormous mistakes’.

How To Survive The Titanic, Or, The Sinking Of J. Bruce Ismay Frances Wilson. (2011). London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ismay as the owner of the Titanic travelled on its maiden voyage and acquired instant notoriety for jumping onto one of the last lifeboats.

I started reading this for personal interest. My maternal great grandfather was a ship’s captain in Liverpool in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and was shipwrecked many times, as was common then. It is included because of its relevance as an exploration of more everyday wrongdoing – an ‘enormous mistake’ made in a moment of extreme stress. Contemplating this brings us back to ourselves, and our clients, it may be hard to imagine being Fred West but we can easily imagine being Ismay.

Wilson gives us a thoughtful probing of both Ismay’s personality and the difficulties of living on after you’ve let yourself down terribly in your eyes and those of others. His jump was not an illegal act nor wicked (in my view) but a betrayal of two codes of honour – that women and children should be saved first and the owner/captain should be the last to quit, going down with the ship if necessary. It was a case of what Midgley describes as the ‘deep, pervasive discrepancy between human ideals and human conduct’ (Midgley, p 73).

A somewhat ‘kangaroo court’ was held immediately afterwards in the US and another more measured (but probably biased) one later in the UK. People were mesmerised by the hubris and hyperbole about Titanic being ‘unsinkable’, they believed Titanic was itself a lifeboat so it became a huge media story.

Witnesses’ narratives of events were muddled and contradictory. Confusion was hardly surprising given the shock, chaos and trauma of the sinking. Wilson lists the ‘factual’ causes of confusion – we all know there were insufficient lifeboats but may not have known the Marconi room, where several iceberg warnings were received, was owned by Marconi Company whose staff were not under the command of the captain hence messages

were not automatically relayed to the bridge. Plus the Captain didn't trust this newfangled technology preferring instead to rely on his experience. The star witness was an uncommunicative Ismay who seemed to be trying neither to incriminate nor justify himself. The public and the press wanted a villain to blame and Ismay was the perfect choice.

The Titanic sank in April 1912 when Ismay was 49. He 'carried on living, keeping out of the way' (p 261) according to his granddaughters who described him as 'emotionally inhibited...inapt for normal family and social life... a corpse' (pp 262 & 268). He had always been a loner and became more so after the sinking although he continued working in various directorships, set up a pension fund for maritime widows and gave generously to charity. He lived on unforgiven for 25 years.

Wilson suggests no one survived really. Many people behaved at least as 'badly' as Ismay and some much worse: women in half empty lifeboats who refused to return to save drowning men, men who dressed as women, millionaires Mr & Mrs Duff Gordon accused of bribing the crew to not allow anyone else in their lifeboat capable of holding 70 people (Ismay took the place of just one person). Wilson concludes he was 'an ordinary man caught in extraordinary circumstances, who behaved in a way which only confirmed his ordinariness. Ismay is the figure we all fear we might be. He is one of us' (p 282).

The Psychology Of Feeling Sorry: The Weight Of The Soul

Peter Randall. (2012). London: Routledge.

Randall, a retired psychologist, focuses his exploration of wrongdoing on betrayal and the possibilities for reconciliation in personal relationships. Over nine chapters, each with a summary, some with implications for practice and illustrative vignettes, he explores aspects of his central theme including conscience, religion, vengeance, shame, guilt, criminal offending, spirituality, empathy and forgiveness and how these may be explored in therapy.

His title refers to the age-old concept of being burdened by one's sins and to the notion found in many religions that at death the soul will be weighed and if the unreconciled bad deeds are heavier than the good ones the soul will be consigned to hell. These ideas persist, I have known avowed atheist clients admit to a fear of some form of existential punishment because of unconfessed wrongdoing.

While not religious himself Randall's aim is to explore the psychological processes and role of religious teaching in creating this weight. His interest extends beyond psychology because for many people religion provides a moral benchmark against which they critically judge their behaviour. Consequently, his analyses consider religious beliefs along with gender, age, background and personality when considering how these factors

influence responses to wrongdoing, remorse, revenge and forgiveness.

He begins by exploring what is known about the structure and development of conscience and how differing styles of parenting and religious teaching shape this. He says, aside from psychopathologies associated with diminished or absent development of conscience, few of us can 'claim to have escaped the discomfort of being sorry for wrongdoing' (p 27) and the more we feel this the more likely we are to avoid the experience by inhibiting future wrongdoing.

Having established the source of the weight and its spur for resolution – as he says 'the main driving force is that of conscience... there is no morality without conscience and empathy for others is its fuel' (p 229) – the rest of the book deals with the topics we frequently encounter in therapy, especially clients dealing with relationship breakdown.

He points out that vengeance, as I think Partington came to understand, often differs from the original wrongdoing only in the sequence of events and because it is a response rather than the original act. Such behaviour invariably hurts the vengeance seeker as much as the perpetrator. He wonders what makes people seek such a pyrrhic victory and sets out exploring the predictors of vengeance and what factors may make someone step back to consider forgiveness, one of which may be the wish not to bear the weight on their soul from refusal to forgive. This is important because the healing that can come from acknowledging guilt (perpetrator) and turning from a life of grudge bearing (victim), neither of which positions leave much space for a 'feel-good' factor, is likely to benefit mental health and quality of life.

He finds that vengeance although generally thought of as a bad idea is the instinctual response of many people to betrayal, and while dispositional vengeance diminishes with age males have a greater predisposition. Also, vengeance comes easier to those who accept religious doctrine without question and to certain psychological personality types, particularly psychoticism and narcissism. On the other hand, people find guidance and help from religious teaching, as Partington did from Buddhism and the Quaker movement.

His research confirms that whether the aim is to repair or to split with dignity it is necessary both for the 'victim' to incline away from vengeance and towards forgiveness, which requires a capacity for empathy. And that a powerful influence on the probability of forgiveness is a contrite apology from the offender that includes understanding and remorse for harm done and expressed intentions of restitution. If this cannot free the victim from their vengeful ruminations and protestations of harm done for whatever reasons (which may include inability to empathise) then he advises realistic therapy goals are for reducing negative emotions rather than reconciliation.

In delineating shame from guilt he shows how a path through these can

lead to remorse and healing, noting that while direct reparation may not be possible indirect reparations can sooth and eventually free shame-bound individuals. Presumably Ismay was attempting this but his already withdrawn personality and public opprobrium made it impossible to really achieve.

Randall describes forgiveness as not a 'dewy-eyed' return to the previous status quo but as 'frequently hard headed and decisive' (p 185) and leading to a new beginning. As with Partington who challenged herself and her own behaviour in relationships as one way to release herself from the pain. She was denied contrition from the Wests but she did find healing and release through admitting her own shame and failings. It was also important for her, as Randall notes, to be open to finding we have 'more in common with the perpetrator than we may be comfortable with' (p 194). For Partington Quaker teaching facilitated this breakthrough.

While I found some material unsurprising (eg evidence that grudge bearing is bad for your health and well being) there was content I found useful and thought provoking and I appreciated his wisdom and wish to look at the subject through a wider lens than usual by taking into account the effects of religious belief still present in our secular society on attitudes to shame, vengeance, remorse and forgiveness. We may be less avowedly religious but increasing numbers of people say they are spiritual and his chapter 'religion, spirituality and remorse' may be helpful in more accurately understanding and exploring the world view of clients whether religious or spiritual or neither.

He concludes saying that like G K Chesterton (the Catholic writer) he is of the opinion that 'we have to be certain of our own morality because ultimately we must suffer for it' (pg 235). It is not the behaviour of others but our own shame and guilt that puts weight on our souls.

'No ear can hear nor tongue can tell the tortures of the inward hell'

The Giaour, Lord Byron.

Diana Pringle

The Ultimate Harry Potter And Philosophy: Hogwarts For Muggles

Gregory Bassham. (2010). Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.

As I sit here in the impressive buildings of Regent's University London, surrounded by its impressive architecture, creaky wooden stairways and students all around, I can almost imagine myself as the Sorting Hat in the Great Hall at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I can stretch the metaphor a little, some days I *feel* like the Sorting Hat *looks*,

a little old, leathery and weather beaten.

Why have I engaged in this exercise of the imagination? Well, the Sorting Hat is tasked with reading a student's thoughts and deciding which of the Hogwarts Houses they would best thrive in – Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor or... Slytherin (a slight shudder runs through me thinking of *that* possibility!). Today I am charged with a similar task – having just read *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles*, I am tasked to make a decision as to which class we allocate it to: *Optimum* (Essential), *Bonum* (Desirable), *Acceptus* (Acceptable) or *Krapidium* (I wouldn't bother).

Before I decide, let me review my reading of it. This book is part of a series of books that tries to bring philosophy to a wider audience by linking academic expertise to popular cultural phenomena as varied as TV shows (e.g. *South Park*, *Lost*, *Family Guy*, *24* and *The Office* (amongst others)), films (such as *Terminator*, *Batman*, and *Battlestar Galactica*) and the music of Metallica. It seems to me that this is a fun, creative and worthy endeavour and something that many of us might reflect upon. Many of us are convinced that our discipline can offer a variety of useful contributions to a number of individual and social projects *if* we can escape the image of being stuck in our perceived ivory tower.

So, how are Basham and colleagues trying to do this? In this book, contemporary philosophers and academics draw on the work of a wide range of philosophers, as varied as Plato, Socrates, Aristotle and Descartes on the one hand to Mill, Kant and Gadamer on the other. The various contributions tackle phenomena as varied as courage, the soul, the self, duplicity, friendship, happiness, justice, love and ambition, good, evil, death and freedom. It's a very thought provoking read.

Different authors tackle these topics in a variety of creative and imaginative ways. In the chapter entitled '*Sirius Black: Man or dog?*', Eric Saeid discusses Sirius/Padfoot to illustrate the complexity of mind and body and their relationship to a sense of self and action; Catherine Jack Deavel and David Paul Deavel consider the notion of transformation in a chapter entitled '*Choosing love: The redemption of Severus Snape*'; Ethics is a part of Gregory Bassham's focus in his chapter entitled '*Love Potion No. 9 3/4*'. This heart-wrenching reflection on Merope Gaunt's dilemma asks us to consider how we might have engaged with having the ability to cast a spell and make someone love us rather than suffer the pain of unrequited love, and the ethics of such an act.

Most chapters are useful considerations of philosophical concepts and the ways these are evident in cultural discourse. However, I did have to question two things before deciding where I would allocate them for readers of this journal. The first was that there are times when the chapter author seems to deviate from what I thought was the key task and seems to take issue with JK Rowling as an individual. Not only do I not feel the points

are entirely relevant (she is, after all, not positioning herself as a philosopher), I am always concerned about this shift from consideration of *topic* to reflection on an *individual*. This bothers me in British existential writing and it bothered me here too. I was left wondering ‘So what if a specific author argues in a way we disagree?’ Its the concept that needs debating or challenging, not the person themselves. If the individual becomes the focus of the debate we run the risk of taking a rather tabloid approach to important intellectual topics rather than an academic and scholarly one. This is not a major criticism of the book as a whole but a concern noted in just a couple of places, overall I think the book does engage very well with important topics and concepts.

The second ‘issue’ is that, while enjoyable and engaging, this is not a book for a ‘lazy’ existential therapist who wants their own topics spoon fed to them. While a variety of philosophies and philosophers are present, there is only limited reference to Heidegger (in chapter 17 – *Beyond Godric’s Hollow*) and the book doesn’t reference Sartre, de Beauvoir, Binswanger or Merleau-Ponty at all. For instance, Anne Collins Smith has a chapter entitled ‘*Harry Potter, radical feminism and the power of love*’. This chapter draws on feminist critiques of the Harry Potter books such as those by Schofer, Heilman and Dresang who, apparently, argue that the story is sexist, and Kern Gladstein and Zettel who have written that the story offers a balanced view of the sexes. I was delighted to see these topics considered from a philosophical perspective, although I did miss a specifically existential-phenomenological contribution which I think would have helped enormously. I was particularly surprised at the absence of any reflection on Beauvoir’s work as I would have thought that this would have been an obvious writer to consider. Conceptually, the commentators referenced still seem to essentialise gender rather than think about Spinelli’s recent outline of how gender is an interpretative construct (Spinelli, forthcoming).

In order to explore these concepts so thoroughly, the book draws intimately on JK Rowling’s rich and magical world and this is part of its grip on the reader. We get to meet old friends such as Harry, Hermione and Ron, the rest of the Weasley family and the steadfast Professor McGonagall, somewhat ditzzy Professor Trelawney, cold Professor Snape and of course the wonderful Professor Dumbledore. And Voldemort is ever present as is the dark side of human existence. And I would suggest that the reader does need to be familiar with these characters and the world in which Harry Potter lives to get the most from this book. Without that frame of reference I suspect there would be too much to look up and to be confused by (for instance why would I shudder at the idea of joining *Slytherin*?) Having said that, I imagine that if you have decided to avoid this literary, film and cultural phenomenon for the past decade or more, this book will not tempt you over to the dark side! Maybe one of the other texts in this series will be more to your liking.

Overall, in my role as quasi ‘Sorting Hat’ I would suggest *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles*, be allocated to *Bonum*. Its not a text that will decipher the key philosophers of existential tradition **and** it is not a text that focuses on the therapeutic so is unlikely to be on the essential list of training courses. However it is an interesting, broad-ranging review of a range of topics drawing on a variety of philosophers and philosophies and offers an inroad into the wider contribution that philosophy can offer us. It is also a wonderful example of how to navigate between the Ivory Tower and the tabloids, how we might play with philosophy in everyday life and in the wider cultural sphere – and suggests that in doing so we might alight on topics and phenomena that philosophical muggles will grasp. For that, if nothing else, I do recommend that it is on every Harry Potter reader’s list even if it doesn’t quite sit at the top.

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Martin Milton

The Analysis of Failure: An Investigation of Failed Cases in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy

Arnold Goldberg. (2012). New York; London: Routledge.

Before reviewing this book, I must confess an interest: I am preoccupied by the failures which have occurred in my consulting room, where I’ve attempted to practise existential therapy for nearly twenty years. I doubt I’m alone in recognising that in my work, with some clients, I have failed. Why these clients and not others?, I ask myself; and who’s to blame? I’ve long wondered why my colleagues rarely admit – let alone publicly discuss – their failures. However, at the 2012 SEA conference – where a facilitator encouraged us to participate in a ‘brainstorming session’ [how I loathe this managerial language!] and identify future conference topics – I managed to screw up my courage, mount the stage and display a large sheet of paper on which I wrote: Why don’t we ever discuss our failures? The silence that greeted this suggestion was deafening. Is failure the dirty little secret of our profession?

Now that I’ve read Arnold Goldberg’s witty, insightful and provocative book, I know that it is; and why: therapists of all persuasions are vulnerable to rescue fantasies; or more bluntly: a ‘...grandiose fantasy of cure’. Therefore, ‘failure lurks in the shadow of every rescue attempt’; and when it occurs, we feel it as a blow to our self-esteem. It’s difficult to be sanguine

about it [who/what's at fault]; moreover, due to the pluralism of technique/theory, 'there can be no guarantee that agreement on the failure or success of any single case will be correct and unanimous'.

Although Goldberg's a psychoanalyst [and his book contains some perfunctory genuflecting before the altar of transference and counter-transference], the conclusions he draws are applicable to any and all schools of therapy; for, according to the author, the ubiquity of failure across all therapeutic methods is the result of rigid adherence to a theoretical model, coupled with ignorance of and/or contempt for alternative ways of working. Rather than a 'one size fits all' stance, he challenges professionals to consider when/whether another methodology might be more helpful/suitable/appropriate. Says Goldberg: 'The question, then, becomes which approach is best under a certain particular set of conditions, and thus an incidence of failure becomes a relative thing (i.e. relative to both analyst or therapist and patient)'.

The bulk of the book is based on qualitative data from Goldberg's 'Failure Project' [a Kafka-esque title if ever there was one], which was prompted by the plaintive query of a psychoanalytical colleague who noted that his peers always presented case studies that went well, or had a minor problem, easily corrected in hindsight, but *never* cases that utterly failed. Equally Kafka-esque was Goldberg's difficulty in recruiting participants to his project: some simply laughed, were insulted or shocked. Although he tried to convince volunteers that the purpose of the exercise was not to ascribe blame, but to determine if practitioners could contemplate failure without the stigma attached to the word, Goldberg records that many volunteers described the experience as sado-masochistic, like '...going to the dentist'. Nonetheless, he believed that such an investigation might be both useful and 'therapeutic'; and he hoped to discover [1] what failure does to us; [2] how we grapple with the meaning of failure; and [3] to disseminate the conclusions. Other reasons for his project included his estimation that what has been written about failure is 'slippery' [that is, unreliable]; and his belief that the entire profession needs better definitions to determine the limitations of any technique, noting that '...the incredible insularity of our various "schools" has prevented the development of ... guidelines as to what works best for what'. In this hope, I fear he is naïve, but better an optimist than a cynic.

How do therapists rationalise failure? Some blame the client – his stubbornness; lack of effort. For those with a very rigid approach, such clients are labelled 'untreatable'. This explanation is especially comforting because it '... completely removes the aura of blame and makes it more a case of bad luck'. For those he calls 'true believers', failure is due to incorrectly applying a chosen methodology [making failure avoidable if one sticks to the rules]. Then he identifies 'a taxonomy of failure': [1] cases that never 'launch'; [2] cases that are interrupted and felt to be unfinished by therapist or client. These interruptions may be external,

i.e. money problems; client moves. Or they may be internal: someone [therapist, client, client's significant other] feels psychologically threatened; [3] cases that 'go bad' [client becomes angry/upset/suddenly quits]; and [4] cases that go on and on without obvious improvement.

Next Goldberg examines therapists' mistakes and mishaps in failed cases. Although he believes failure isn't a singular event but the result of many factors, 'a manifestation of a multitude of decisions that go awry', he doesn't mince words if therapists err in the following ways. The first is not doing/saying something and hiding behind silence: 'muteness as a virtue', he calls it; or 'not talking about what needs to be talked about'. Second is doing what shouldn't be done, or a misapplication or overuse of technique. And third, because most clients unwittingly take part in a 'therapeutic lottery', he is especially harsh when therapists refuse to consider and offer alternative treatment in problematic cases '...out of ignorance, prejudice, greed...'. Failure can also be a mutual construction of both parties, an uneasy – occasionally combusive – mixture compounded by the rigid application of technique by the therapist and unrealistic expectations of the client. Failure, he says, is difficult to describe, 'but we know it when we see it.'

Goldberg's conclusion is refreshingly dialectic: by analysing failure, we expose the pitfall of only discussing success; for by only focussing on successful cases, '...there is no great need to learn anything new... [success] ...can well become a prison house of limited knowledge'. Therefore, he proposes that training institutes and professional bodies should emulate the medical profession and schedule venues where clinicians can present properly disguised cases of failure, much as hospitals regularly conduct 'morbidity and mortality' meetings.

I wonder: are we existential practitioners open enough, humble enough, to recognise and accept that our paradigm is one of many, and may not best serve every client? Can we admit our failures? John Heaton does, in the preface to his book *The Talking Cure: Wittgenstein's Therapeutic Method for Psychotherapy*, where he apologises 'to those who came in the first twenty or so years of my practice as they had to suffer my inexperience'. Peter Lomas, Irvin Yalom and Leslie Farber have also been equally candid. And then there's Beckett's famous injunction: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'

Finally, I must, in good conscience, add a postscript: should you discuss alternative therapeutic approaches with a prospective client, you may find, as I did, that said client decides to seek an alternative.

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Marty Radlett

Spectre of the Stranger: Towards a Phenomenology of Hospitality

Manu Bazzano. (2012). Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.

What is Manu Bazzano up to in *Spectre of the Stranger*? Far too much to do justice to in a review of this size, but here goes: radical ethics, otherness, culture, philosophy, politics, subjectivity, art, poetry, love, and psychotherapy. On the one hand it feels fast paced as it moves through a vast range of topics and yet on the other it alerts us to the fact that all of these topics are connected, what's more they're connected to us, by us, through us, as we are inextricably entwined within them: the topics are nothing without us. In addition to this he manages to flavour this work with his belief, understanding, and commitment to Buddhism. I am not a Buddhist and yet the ethics presented here might be enough to turn my head, maybe even embrace my heart, and I have read a lot of Buddhist literature in the last dozen years or so that had not managed to do that.

My interest in this text is that of the radical ethic in encountering the other, particularly in the field of counselling and psychotherapy. Bazzano poetically illustrates the value of Philosophy and Art in articulating such an ethic via the work of Nietzsche, Genet, Levinas, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, Marx, Hölderlin to name but a few.

The value of Philosophy and Art in the field of Psychotherapy training seems to be greatly lacking in my opinion, and yet the rich descriptions from Philosophy and Art used by the author to illustrate his point, demonstrate their value and contribution if we as trainers can dare to be more radical in our teaching and presentation of therapy, its models, arguments and applications. Implicitly throughout the text is the begging question 'what do we think we are up to as therapists?' – a question in my mind that doesn't seem to be asked as frequently as it should be. In attempting to answer that question the poetics contained within *Spectre of the Stranger* has to ask other questions: who is this 'I' at all that thinks it is asking? What is the nature of this 'I' sitting in the therapist's chair, and what is it to speak of my 'I' as a known quantity?

In his answer Bazzano presents us with the non pre-determined ethic, his 'goddess in continuous flight, a goddess who exists [only] in flight' (p 34): encounter in the immediacy of the moment, not as a sentimental artificial nod to authenticity as is sometimes presented in the psychotherapeutic field, but rather as an honest acknowledgement of the fluidity of all our capacities and capabilities as human beings: our darkness, our decay, our ability to bring about change through the experience of the full spectrum of who we are, and without 'guilty conscience' too:

It is essential to free ethical and political commitment from conscience, liberal guilt and masochism. Nietzsche reminds us of

that peculiar plant, bad conscience, growing in the psyche's foliage. We cannot ascribe ethics to guilty conscience. Western thought after Kierkegaard promoted a vision of interiority as atonement: one looks at one's soul in order to purify it of its mistakes. This is itself a radical shift from the view of self as a solid entity whose only way of pacifying anxiety is by subduing the non-self. But there is a small problem: interiority does not intrinsically exist; the subject is born when adequately responding to the other.

Response to alterity is loyalty to the event...such response is made possible by our recognition of the non-intrinsic existence of the self and the exceptionality of this embodied subject within the sea of phenomena.'

(p 90)

How easy it is to be disloyal and disingenuous and slip into the inauthentic stance of believing to 'know my fixed self' when in the counsellor's seat, and what a missed opportunity to take flight with Bazzano's goddess and greet the stranger unreified. What a commitment it takes to be open, vulnerable, fluid and free in the moment with the 'other', creating the space for the possibility to poetically create between us a chance and a dance for meeting.

For all its assertions, claims and poetry, this text creates lots of questions: What does it mean to speak of other, ethics, autonomy, authenticity, or identity in the psychotherapeutic world? How can we speak of such matters without an understanding of the wider issues of culture, difference, and otherness? Not otherness as diversity but as a radical address of the otherness within me as well as you, the stranger in me and the stranger that is you: If I am other, you are the radical other. What might that mean and how do we address that? Having an understanding of the radical other as a radical ethic serves to 'open' minds, doors, communities, and countries. More importantly, as Bazzano articulates, the ethic of that openness may not be about 'goodness' as it may necessarily need to defy the party line, the bourgeois slumber, and the capitalist coffers:

Good and evil live together in the organism as generative forces, as vagabond and winged energies threatening to overwhelm the person. One can use morality as a method for taming those energies or resort instead to ethics in order to realize their power...Art and Ethics are two creative outlets for these vital, impersonal forces, and the task of the of therapeutic work is their integration.

(p 116)

What does it mean to be bad in a psychotherapeutic field dominated by rationalism and positive thinking? Where does this good girl go to be

bad? When are we as therapists going to sit in the chair and declare our capacity for evil, our inconsistency, our dilemma? When are we going to shift out of the smugness of our ‘personally developed selves’ and into the open-handed space of nothingness with a conviction of blind faith in the very process of life itself as we encounter the stranger in crisis: a crisis that we are not exempt from?

A repudiation of the daimonic is on the other hand equivalent to narcissism, to wanting to believe that we are always delightful and upright, a stance which makes us project the daimonic outside ourselves

(p 116)

In my favourite chapter ‘Dwelling Poetically on this Earth’ (pp105–126) the author finds ethics and rebellion in the act of poetry:

Ethics originates within the observation of phenomena, hence it is inscribed within the practice of phenomenology, which teaches us that perception and appreciation of contingency is a poetic act

(p 105)

In a climate when the humanities are being dumbed down or erased completely because of the incredulous capitalist tenet that it lacks economic value, forgetting at once that we are human beings and not human resources as our sales tag indicates, the author reminds us that it is only in the Arts that we find those perspicuous descriptions of what it is to be human, phenomenologically, in all our glory and all our disappointing horror, which in turn defies reification:

It is again to art that we must turn, rather than psychology or sociology, ...the prose of Virginia Woolf escapes solidification, affirms the ephemeral beauty of existence, dewdrops on the morning grass. Art shows the fundamental principles of phenomenology. Awareness of phenomena liberates us from the Cartesian/Freudian psychic apparatus; it alerts us to the fluidity of the self and the presence of the other

(p 105)

Bazzano describes poetry as rebellion:

...as living presence, as disappearance of the subject (user, listener and consumer) within the events of the world, as refusal of the cult of information and of the compulsory acquisition of data, of fragments of lived life acquired as goods – a process which in turn transforms the subject into an item to be purchased. Poetry thus understood resists the objectification of

humans and their sinister metamorphosis into news items. Poetic rupture reminds us of our immanent presence within phenomena and eposes us to the ineffable, to a poetic understanding of existence

(p 117)

My feelings are that whilst the text is rich as a source of reference for further reading of other important voices in the cultural, political, personal and psychotherapeutic debate represented here, the voice of this author has the power, the poetics, and the political commitment to stand-alone. Reducing the number of references may slow the pace somewhat and open the text up to a wider audience, making Bazzano and his own poetics more accessible. That said, the pace seems to add to the poignancy and therefore the urgency of the discussion and so taps into my own sense of urgency for such a debate.

The well-woven references offer us a well-crafted text that sets it apart from other dry academic texts only because of the fluid poetical song of Bazzano and his commitment to his own radical voice. This text may be slim in stature but it belies the layer upon layer of rich flavours that work beautifully upon the palate, and just as you lick your lips and clean the palate ready for the next bite, there is a burst on the tongue reminding you of a poetry that lingers: a poetry that is committed to housing rebellion.

Julie Webb

Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology: Combining Core Approaches

Nollaig Frost.(ed.) (2011). Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Phenomenology For Therapists: Researching The Lived World

Linda Finlay. (2011). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

First of all, a warning: Do not judge these books by their covers! Looking, for example, at the cover image of Finlay's *Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World*, which is apparently entitled 'Executives standing in lobby' (no joke), the impression is of somewhat mesmerised or robot-like humans that could have stepped out of an episode of *Dr Who*, bearing no relationship with the content of the book at all (see below).

However, focusing first on *Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology: Combining Core Approaches*, the old adage not to judge the book by the cover goes even further than that. In fact, I would ask the reader not to judge this book by the first 117 pages either. With only another 75 pages of main text to go thereafter, the reader of this review may start to wonder

why to give time to this book at all, or even to this review. This is where I ask the reader to bear with me, as in my view this is an indispensable book for anyone who, like me, believes that each qualitative research method only gives us one particular and thus limited facet of the issue under investigation, that we need to widen the horizons of our social science research endeavours and that we need to move away from a one-truth-fits-all approach, not only in our philosophies but also in our sciences. If you just look at the title of this book, if you take it from the shelf, or if you just look at the cover on the web, you may very likely feel puzzled about my claim that this is an indispensable book in such a pursuit. However, at the time of writing (November 2013), there is no other book on qualitative research methods, as far as I am aware, which provides a practical introduction to one of the most promising developments in social science research of the last few years: pluralistic qualitative research. And it is the aforementioned 75 pages that do exactly that and therefore give this book its particular edge.

Having such a unique position in the market (and since 2011 when it was first published), I have been surprised why this is not reflected in the title and why the book is such a mixed offering: half – or more than half – introduction to qualitative research methods, less than half introduction to pluralistic qualitative research. Were the publishers scared that the pluralistic label would alienate the mainstream? Were they hoping to catch two ends of the market? Did the authors not have enough material on pluralism and therefore bolted it on to a standard introductory text? Other questions raised by the packaging are: Why call it rather unadventurously ‘*combining* core approaches’? Why shy away from the much richer, deeper and more meaningful term ‘pluralistic’?

I don’t want to suggest that the initial 117 pages are not worth reading as such. The first part of the book constitutes a basic but solid and clear introduction to four different types of qualitative research: Grounded Theory, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Discourse Analysis and Narrative Analysis. Each chapter follows a similar structure, covering the basics of each method under headings such as history, ontology, epistemology, methods, applications etc. and ends with a useful chapter summary. There are also numerous boxes interspersed, containing research examples, case studies and reflections on using the methods.

To be fair, the introduction suggests that the book’s intention is to introduce each of the approaches as single approaches first before describing how to combine them, and the book furthermore argues and shows that most single approaches can be used in multiple ways. Given its declared purpose, the book has probably fulfilled its agenda, but, speaking as someone who is excited by the radical and creative possibilities that methodological pluralism entails, I feel a little disappointed by this modesty and would have preferred a stronger and bolder entrée of pluralistic qualitative research onto the scene.

Another point to be made is that basic introductions to different qualitative methods have been done before, and I can't really see how Part 1 of this book adds to this. For example, Carla Willig's (2013) *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*, now in its third edition, in my view provides a more thorough and more thoughtful introduction to different qualitative methods, and Evanthia Lyons and Adrian Coyle's (2007) edited volume *Analysing Qualitative Data in Psychology* constitutes a more research practice-orientated introduction to actually using the four different methods, and the authors not only provide a thorough introductory chapter on each method but also a chapter each in which these methods are applied to the same data set, which can be found in the Appendix, accompanied by reflections on the practical utility of each method, with the added bonus of written-up reports for each method interspersed with further reflections and recommendations. Compared to those two books, Part 1 of Nollaig Frost's introductory volume possibly appeals through its simplicity and might therefore be particularly suitable for undergraduates trying to make up their minds about which qualitative method to choose. As regards beginners, however, another recent text succeeds particularly well as a hands-on and step-by-step guide to conducting qualitative research, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark, published in 2013, which might arguably be more recommended for those just starting out in qualitative research.

In sum, if Part 1 is best suited for undergraduates, I can't really see how it works in combination with Part 2, which may be more interesting to postgraduates and beyond, as it could be argued that it is preferable for undergraduates to get a specific method under their belt first before entering the more complex world of pluralistic research.

Moving now to the innovative heart and soul of the book, the aforementioned 75 pages, or 'Part 2: Combining Core Approaches', it is this part of the book that makes it such an interesting read. It consists of four chapters that introduce the reader to different aspects that are relevant to conducting pluralistic qualitative research.

The first chapter of Part 2 deals with practical issues when carrying out such research. The chapter author, Sevasti-Melissa Nolas, situates pluralistic research within a broadly postmodern and critical psychological perspective and takes the reader through different practical stages of doing research such as literature review, study design, recruitment, data elicitation and analysis, explaining the kinds of decisions pluralistic researchers need to make above and beyond those of single-method researchers and providing examples from actual research. As a counselling psychologist I was particularly interested in the examples and recommendations relating to research designed to inform and evaluate therapeutic practice. It makes sense to me that the

world of practice is complex and multi-faceted and that a multi-perspectival approach may yield findings of greater ecological validity and practical relevance.

The second chapter then turns to the topic of interpreting data pluralistically. The author, Nollaig Frost, discusses different approaches, for example applying different methods of analysis to the same data set or using ‘within-method pluralistic interpretation’ (p 154), as in ‘dialogical phenomenology’ or group phenomenology, in which different researchers analyse the same data set using the same method of analysis and then develop both consensual and divergent analyses. This chapter illuminatingly describes how applying multiple approaches in a systematic, rigorous and transparent manner allows for greater extraction of meaning to produce rich and credible readings that can dig deeper and take us further than single-perspective approaches:

Pluralistic interpretation provides a way to minimise the imposition of any one ontological position. It aims to illuminate what is real for others while minimising the impact of the researcher and their lifeworld

(p 148)

For existential researchers interpretative pluralism may be particularly attractive, as it does not impose a particular version of reality onto the subject matter but opens up new and multiple layers of meaning, some of which may fit together harmoniously, while others may create uncomfortable tensions. While such tensions may be difficult to tolerate for researchers who seek objective ‘truth’, they can provide new meanings and insights into the complexity of the topic for those who prefer more differentiated understandings. Furthermore, the pluralistic researcher is confronted with even more choices than the ordinary qualitative researcher, and thus the process of research can become an existential project in itself, as discipline and rigour are warranted but no preconceived rules are available that can be drawn on. However, I feel that pluralism as presented in this volume would probably best suit existential researchers with a more critical and constructionist slant than those of a more purely phenomenological persuasion. Having said that, some versions of methodological pluralism as, for example, group phenomenology, could be easily adapted with a more existential-phenomenological perspective in mind.

The third chapter of Part 2, also written by Nollaig Frost, provides guidance on writing up pluralistic research. This chapter steers the reader confidently through the challenge of writing up research that in a worst-case scenario may at this point consist in reams of multiple analyses of multiple data sources done by multiple researchers, and a number of different ways of structuring, displaying and layering of the data, all with the intention of enabling the presentation of a multivocal yet coherent whole, are introduced.

Finally, the book ends with a brief chapter in which Frost summarises the book and pulls out the key points for conducting pluralistic research. When I put the book down, I felt rather well-fed and keen to apply the new insights but also slightly wary about the vicissitudes of taking such an approach. When I used interpretative pluralism some years ago, I was rather naïve about the challenges and just embraced them like the archetypal Fool travelling into the unknown. After reading *Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology: Combining Core Approaches* I was wondering whether I would use a pluralistic approach now, and after some reflection thought I would; I might not travel as light as I did before but I'd certainly have better equipment in my backpack now.

Turning now to the second book, *Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World* by Linda Finlay, I would not want to compare this to other books. Although Darren Langdrige's volume on *Phenomenological Psychology: Theory, Research and Method* also provides a very good introduction to a number of phenomenological methods, I think that the two books each have their own focus and flavour and can happily sit next to each other. In fact, I would probably recommend them both.

But let's listen to Linda Finlay:

I want to do and hear about research that teaches me something new and, ideally, moves me in some way. I want research with the potential to contribute something to my practice, to help me to better understand the therapeutic process and my clients' needs. I seek research that enables them to make sense of their own experiences and have this witnessed. I also want to spread the word to others. All this, I argue, can be made possible through recourse to phenomenology, with its enriching and transformative possibilities.

For me, phenomenology has become more than a research methodology. It is a way of being.

(p 12)

What Linda Finlay describes in this quote as her needs and expectations with regard to research seems quite basic and simple, even commonsensical. Of course, who would not agree that we want to learn from research, that we want it to be useful to our work? That we want it to be meaningful? Yet, what these simple wishes also reveal is that, as we probably know from reading a lot of research that is out there, finding meaningful, useful and relevant research is by no means the norm. Thus, her desire for something so seemingly ordinary becomes at the same time

a desire for the extraordinary if not the impossible. Finlay's answer to the dilemma, phenomenology, satisfies both desires: focusing on the ordinary, the actually lived world, has the potential to transform us in extraordinary ways. And she shows in this book that this paradox, which is inherent in the phenomenological project, is worth pursuing with wonder and awe, with dedication and passion:

The strength of the method lies in its ability to bring to life the richness of existence through description of what may appear at first sight to be ordinary, mundane living. The magic comes when we focus so deeply on aspects of individuals' ordinary lives we see that what is revealed is, invariably, something special; something more. What is revealed is actually quite extra-ordinary.

(p 26)

This is no ordinary book, and I hesitate to fill the page with commentary and summaries, as I'd much rather present a range of quotations that might whet readers' appetite for more, so they can experience it for themselves. However, the task of the reviewer is also to stand back a little, something not easily achieved with a text that draws you in on so many levels. I first reviewed this book for *Counselling Psychology Review* two years ago, shortly after it was first published. The timing was good, as I had just become involved in teaching phenomenological methods and acting as a research supervisor for existential counselling psychology and psychotherapy doctoral students, most of whom were using or hoping to use phenomenological approaches in their research. My appreciation of the book has not changed, only increased if anything since then, and I will gladly present my reasons for this in what follows. Reviewing this book for a second time now, and for *Existential Analysis*, I realize, though, that I imagine that many readers will already own a copy or have at least looked at it somewhere, for example those actively involved in psychotherapy-related phenomenological research, so this review may not offer them anything new. However, there may, of course, be new researchers, needing to make decisions about which direction to take in their inquiries and more experienced researchers, who are perhaps looking for new insights and new inspiration. Furthermore, there may be all those others who could potentially benefit from this book, and these may not only be researchers or those wanting to do research, and it is with this section of the readership in mind that the task of reviewing this book takes on a particularly exciting turn. Let's see...

Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World is in my opinion the best companion to phenomenological research available today. It is extremely well-written and well-researched, comprehensive and rich

but at the same time clear and easy to read, a welcome change from the often esoteric writing that pervades much that has been published on phenomenology. The book is divided into three parts of approximately 80 pages each. The first part provides the reader with an excellent overview of the theoretical and philosophical foundations of phenomenology. The second part contains six chapters which introduce the reader to six different phenomenological research approaches including Descriptive Empirical Phenomenology, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Lifeworld Approaches, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, First-Person Approaches and Reflexive-Relational Approaches. The third part deals with the application of phenomenological methods in practice, providing hands-on advice to actually carrying it out.

Apart from the wealth of information contained in this volume (and please do read the footnotes, as they contain many curious and additional facts, interesting quotes, tips, references to current debates and other useful sources and a whole range of other valuable nuggets of insight), what makes this book so special and worthwhile, is the style in which it is written. There is a sense of the author's presence throughout the text. The feeling is that the author lives and breathes phenomenology and shares her experience and understandings in a holistic way that does not only speak to the intellect of the reader but to the reader as an embodied fellow being:

Phenomenology – when it is done well – discloses, transforms and inspires. That is why it excites me, why I am passionate about it. It is not just a research method. It offers a way of both being in and of seeing the world, from inside and out. It is not just an intellectual project; it is a life practice. It is concerned with the discovery and celebration of our own immersion in body-world experience.

(p 26)

Finlay communicates her grasp of the subject in a way that is inherently phenomenological. As I put it in my previous review 'it is in keeping with the fundamental assumptions and aims of phenomenology; we are not getting to know phenomenology as an object that exists outside of consciousness but we become aware of it through an intersubjective process of sharing in the lived and conscious experience and understanding of it as conveyed by another' (Steffen, 2012: p 75). It is this aspect that makes this book highly recommendable to anyone interested in phenomenology, even to those who are not concerned with research. However, it is possible that such a reader's interest in doing research is sparked as a result of engaging with this writing, particularly as Finlay shows so well how there is an overlap between phenomenological research and therapy that foregrounds

the client's experience, and it seems that one of the core intentions of *Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World* is to provide guidance for practitioners who wish to make the transition to research:

If you have been hesitating to cross the bridge between therapy practice and research, I urge you to stride forth. But be warned, you need to choose your route through research territory with care.

(p 7)

Finlay succeeds in making phenomenological research transparent and accessible without losing complexity or depth, and in Part III she provides practical advice that readers can follow step by step. Her other core intention concerns bridging the practice-research divide on a grander scale, asking the question '[h]ow can the chasm that lies between clinical practice and academic research be bridged?' (p 5). As she concedes herself, this question is only partially answered in her book, and for long stretches of the book I did not find many references to psychotherapy research or why the book is mainly 'for therapists' when it provides such a broad overview of phenomenology that it could easily take on a more generic title.

One set of approaches Finlay introduces, the so-called 'reflexive-relational approaches' may be particularly useful in the endeavour of narrowing the gap between research and practice, as such a method could be especially suitable for therapists, drawing on 'relational skills, empathy and reflexive capacity used in practice' (p 173), attending 'to the layered embodied intersubjective relationship between researcher and co-researcher' (p 91) and involving 'a way of being *with* rather than doing *to*' (p 166). What is interesting in the relational-centred method is the active involvement of the researcher in the research, similar to dialogal and heuristic research, only with a stronger hermeneutic emphasis that includes a degree of relativism as it regards meanings as developed through co-construction. However, it must be said that this is still a relatively new method, and Finlay warns therapists and researchers to only apply it selectively, one danger being that it might 'invite self-indulgent or skewed findings' (p 174). As this method has been a prominent focus for her in recent years, we may perhaps expect further development in this regard, to which I would look forward with anticipation.

At the end of Part II, I would have liked to have seen another chapter reflecting on all the methods introduced in the light of the initially described intentions, perhaps drawing out the key take-home messages, and I felt a little left hanging after the intense build-up about the 'magic' of phenomenology. Nevertheless, these queries and wonderings do not take away from the richness of the book and only make the reader hungrier for more, well, this reader, as undoubtedly much depends on personal taste when judging

a book, especially when it is one that is written with so much personal investment. And therefore the evaluation, just as when judging research, in Finlay's words 'depends on the beholder – whatever works for you.' And you don't really know this unless you try.

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Edith Steffen

The Psychology of Retirement: Coping With The Transition From Work

Derek Milne. (2013). UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Derek Milne's *The Psychology of Retirement* is described by its publishers, Wiley-Blackwell as 'the first text of its kind to draw on proven psychological coping strategies'. If gut feeling suggests this is an extravagant claim, I can tell you I would have been of the same mind until I began to study retirement literature myself some years ago, and was surprised at the paucity of specifically psychological application to retirement – so this is a welcome contribution to the much wider sociological and organizational canon. Milne applies tried and tested theories from psychology to the process of retirement (often an unexpectedly stressful transition to a very different life) employing case studies to illustrate his suggestions.

He frames his book dexterously around the acronym RECIPE which he tells us is:

Resources (e.g. sufficient money)

Exercise

Coping Strategies

Intellectual activity

Purpose

Engagement (social support).

His book employs a 'self-help' approach, incorporating all that is useful and straightforward in such a method but also, inevitably, some

of what could be viewed as cursory.

Milne's most interesting central theme is that which concerns 'stress, stressors and coping' and although he never mentions the word 'existentialism', I'm assuming that readers of this publication will be with me in recognising common threads in the following analysis of 'stress':

First a word on definition, which is much needed in relation to the confused concept of 'stress'. Although the term is usually associated with unpleasant events [...] it is more accurate to view stress as a pressure, something that we feel we have to react to in some way.

(p 14)

He goes on to tell us that individuals show highly variable reactions to stressors, some people remain unaffected by stress, some are extremely distressed and 'ruminate' on their 'woes', while others '*appear to mature more rapidly as a result of managing difficult circumstances effectively...*' (p 15) In existential terms anxiety and stress are, of course, not equivalent: for Kierkegaard (1884/1970) anxiety is a general dread concerned with lack of meaning; for Sartre (1943/2003) anxiety acts as a kind of 'moral conscience' brought about by an inescapable sense of responsibility for one's own choices and actions. I would suggest that Milne is referring to 'stress' in the same way – i.e. if utilised, it provides a similar motivating force on people who are no longer 'distracted' by work, to combat emptiness, and to create more fulfilling lives for themselves.

We are then introduced to 'coping' beginning with Freud's spectrum of unconscious coping through denial, intellectualisation and repression, and its dangers (for Freud, of anxiety or depression); but Milne is more interested in the conscious coping he wishes his book to encourage. He points out that coping is more important at this stage in life, as loss of physical and mental capacities can be conceived as 'threatening' and that when lonely, as a significant proportion of retired people are, adopting an attitude of 'active solitude' can be a healthy form of coping. He cites Lazarus and Folkman (1984 p 141) as a source for one definition of modern psychology's view of 'coping':

'an ongoing process of personal adjustment that enables individuals to maintain their functioning during stressful periods, but also, a specific, deliberate and effortful process of thinking, feeling and behaving to reduce or remove stress (and the associated emotional or physical distress), leading us to maintain our wellbeing and to develop as a person.'

It is of course, open to question exactly what kind of 'deliberate and effortful process of thinking, feeling and behaving' is being referred to

(because as psychologists/psychotherapists we have all the way from CBT to Mindfulness at our disposal), and whether the word ‘feeling’ can legitimately be included in such a statement. These solutions which he refers to as ‘active coping’ are the subject of the central chapters in the book: ‘Reframing Retirement’, ‘Relating Retirement’ and ‘Supporting Retirement’, each neatly illustrated by a pertinent case-study.

There is a section in ‘Reframing Retirement’ entitled ‘The Good Life’ which suggests that ‘*the familiar modern-day answer to the question about the most desirable life is perhaps often “to be rich and famous”*’ (p 67); Milne also discusses the Socratic notion that ‘*the good life cannot simply be characterized in terms of getting what you want, regardless of how this affects others*’ (p 67). This brings me to the question: who is the book written for? On reading the above I wondered how many people reach their mid sixties with either of these attitudes intact. In the early chapters, the book gives us a very comprehensive review of retirement research, but thereafter it focuses (apart from addressing ageing and death, of which more later) on what makes for a good life at any age, and is very informative as such – it might serve those few sixty-somethings too whose busy former lives may not have given space for such musings, but for your average retiring person...? As I say, I wonder. I do feel that these three central chapters could just as easily have been called ‘Reframing’, ‘Relating’ and ‘Supporting’ and could have been put out as a (quite largely) Positive Psychology book for general use. ‘Re-framing’ is liberally illustrated by sports psychology anecdotes (Milne’s previous occupations include coach, sport and exercise psychologist) and although often apt and inspiring, there is always a danger in applying performance-related strategies to deep life-long psychological issues.

The confusion is compounded by some of the research samples used – in one study on couples and depression (Harris, Pistrang and Barker, 2006), the reader, deep in thoughts of retirement as the chapter is called ‘Relating in Retirement’, is suddenly confronted with a participant sample where the ages range from 28-57. This reader was disorientated. Whilst, of course, accepting that it is perfectly legitimate to use general research to illustrate aspects of retirement, I do note that this was a phenomenological study, and the experiences of retired couples coping with one depressed partner may (and probably would) have thrown up different issues.

However, there are interesting research findings related in this chapter: for instance a study conducted in Israel (2009) found that those older employees who worked the most approaching retirement experienced less ‘*breadth and depth of emotional support from close family members*’ (p 83), an effect which continued into retirement. It is the report authors’ speculation which ‘chimes’ for me – that those working longer hours saw the workplace as their main way of meeting their emotional needs – for personal accomplishment or meaning. So for this population retirement

may not only cause a great sense of loss but also an impression that the quality of their support has decreased, when in actuality they had never nurtured it – they had been looking in the opposite direction for it.

Existential-phenomenologists may be interested in Milne's passage on emigration or (as I understand it) any sort of uprooting in retirement. He warns:

'One can see that escaping abroad to an attractive climate (and far from an adverse social situation) has its appeals, and there may seem little to lose. However it is all too easy to underestimate the support we take for granted in the familiar location in which we live, not least the comforting effects of familiar surroundings, routines, and facilities.'

(p 104)

I am put in mind of Deurzen's four dimensions of existence, particularly the *umwelt* (physical world of the individual) and the *mitwelt* (social world). In their book on Existential therapy (2011 pp 17 & 18) Deurzen and Adams say this of the *umwelt*:

'This is the outside ring of our world relations and includes the body we have, the concrete surroundings we find ourselves in, the climate and weather, objects and material possessions...'

And of the *mitwelt* this:

'This dimension includes our response to the culture we live in, as well as to the class and race we belong to[...] we need others for our physical and emotional survival and all too often we miss them or feel lonely without them.'

Milne writes movingly about what he calls 'place attachment' which he says is usually based on a strong sense of belonging; he also refers to 'place identity' and reminds readers that tearing oneself away can produce 'a strange discomfort or even alienation' (p 104). His book is at its most interesting in these original and considered moments.

Where the disparate strands do come together is undoubtedly in Milne's handling of ageing, death and dying, where we can see parallels with both life-span literature (Erikson 1959/80) and existential thinking in the following:

'...although you may be getting older this has enabled you to acquire wisdom along the way [...] One of the five aspects of this kind of wisdom is the capacity to recognize and manage uncertainty.'

(p 77)

Milne nowhere mentions Heidegger (1926/62), a rich source on death and dying whose central tenet is that we are all of us 'beings-towards-

death' who must accept our nature in order to be both authentic and truly alive, but in his chapter 'Learning from Life' he might just as well have:

Paradoxically, when we inhibit thoughts of our death, we can 'deadened' our lives, numbing anxious feelings through isolating activities [...] and the use of substances or fixed routines to control our feelings.

(p 128)

Milne goes on to say that acceptance of our death may carry sadness and anxiety with it, but also tends to foster 'spontaneity in social involvement, a realization that time is limited' and 'flexible and genuine personal functioning' (p 128). So no disagreement with the great man there.

Milne's book is comprehensive, covering all of retirement from pet-owning, allotments, tourism and grandparenting, through diet, exercise, ageing and challenging the brain, to loneliness, and finally reflection, regrets, religion, spirituality and, bravely I think, 'happiness'! Would it be of use to an existential practitioner? I would suggest not hugely for its insights, but as a reminder of the myriad psychological issues inherent in this, one of life's major transitions, it would serve as a very useful manual, not least for the opportunity to muse on the relevance to retirement of some of the central existential themes: meaning, purpose, freedom, choice, identity creation, alienation and a frontier crossed where the end of life is, perhaps for the first time, in clear view and needing to be acknowledged and addressed.

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Prunella Gee

Publications received for review

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

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Book Reviews

- Milton, M. (ed.) (2010). *Therapy and Beyond: Counselling Psychology contributions to therapeutic and social issues*. Chichester: Wiley.
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- Papadopoulos, L., Cross C. and Bor R. (eds) (2003). *Reporting in Counselling and Psychotherapy: A Trainees Guide to Preparing Case Studies and Reports*. Hove: Routledge.
- Roberts, R. (2011). *Real to Reel: Psychiatry at the Cinema*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS.
- Thompson, D. (2012). *The Fix. How Addiction is Invading our Lives and Taking Over Your World*. London: Collins.
- Wong, P. (ed.) (2012). *The Human Quest for Meaning: Theories, Research and Practice*. Hove: Routledge.

Existential Analysis

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Existential Analysis 25.1 January 2014

Journal of The Society for Existential Analysis

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