

EXISTENTIALISM AND EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

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INTRODUCTION

Philosophy and psychotherapy

It is somewhat surprising that philosophy and psychotherapy do not have a more distinguished history of co-operation. Both disciplines are concerned with human well being and human living, the one in a theoretical manner, the other in a much more pragmatic way. One would expect psychotherapists to have noted the central importance of philosophy to the practice of their own profession and draw on philosophy as a source for understanding their clients' predicaments. Unfortunately this has not been the case. Psychotherapists have on the whole neglected the study of philosophy, which they have frequently dismissed as irrelevant and they have turned to medicine and psychology as the disciplines of theoretical reference for their domain. This may well be because of the aridity and high level of abstraction of much of western philosophy. This is rather ironic as Hellenistic philosophy several millennia ago set out as a disciplined search for the well lived human life, or eudaimonia. Philosophy then proposed a form of dialectical debate where individuals were encouraged to seek to clarify their beliefs about the world in order to come to a better understanding of their conflicts and the objectives of their everyday existence (Nussbaum 1994, Vlastos 1991).

Philosophy to a large extent lost track of its own mission to understand, clarify and sustain the concrete realities of ordinary people and as it spawned the sciences became increasingly abstract and detached from its former objectives. This is particularly evident in logical positivism. Nevertheless there has always been a strand of philosophy that concerned itself with human issues, which is that of ethical philosophy. There are a number of philosophers, like Kant, Rousseau, Spinoza, Hume and Hegel who have made important contributions in this way and they should be essential reading for trainee psychotherapists. It is however with the new impulse of the philosophies of existence, particularly those of Kierkegaard (1844, 1846, 1855) and Nietzsche (1881, 1882, 1886, 1887, 1888) that philosophers themselves became directly interested again in the concrete questions of human existence. The philosophies of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche draw attention to the subjective life of the individual and in this way provide an excellent basis for the kind of philosophy that can inform the practice of psychotherapy. With the advent of Husserl's phenomenology (Husserl 1900, 1913, 1925, 1929) a more concrete methodology of investigation of human issues was proposed enabling existentialism to come into its own with the work of philosophers such as Heidegger (1927, 1954, 1957), Sartre (1939, 1943, 1948) and Merleau Ponty (1945, 1964, 1968).

Existentialism became a popular movement as people reclaimed philosophy as being of personal relevance. Here at last was an approach that would give them a handle on the moral choices, existential crises and constant challenges of daily reality. Philosophy was shown to be capable of providing a forum for debate where light could be thrown on the far-reaching changes that humanity had to negotiate in

the modern and post-modern era. It was therefore predictable that existentialism should also generate a new form of psychotherapy in which medical considerations were replaced with wider human ones and where a person's particular problems were set off against the background of a general existential perspective.

Existential psychotherapy

Existential psychotherapy is the only established form of psychotherapy that is directly based in philosophy rather than in psychology. It was founded at the beginning of the century, on the one hand by the original work of Karl Jaspers in Germany, (1951, 1963, 1964) which itself influenced Heidegger's thinking and on the other hand by the work of two Swiss psychiatrists, Ludwig Binswanger (1946, 1963) and Medard Boss (1957, 1962, 1979, 1988), who were in turn inspired by the work of Heidegger to create an alternative method of dealing with emotional and mental distress. All three turned from psychiatry to philosophy, in an attempt to understand the human predicament, paradoxes and conflicts of their patients. These early applications of existentialist philosophy to psychotherapy have been followed by a number of other and varied attempts, as for instance in the work of Frankl (1946, 1955, 1967), May (1958, 1969, 1983), Laing (1960, 1961, 1964, 1967), Szasz (1961, 1965, 1992) Yalom (1980, 1989) and van Deurzen (1984, 1988, 19, 1997).

There has however continued to be great diversity between these and other authors as no official or formal rendering of existential psychotherapy has ever been agreed. To confuse matters further existential principles have also been applied more indirectly to psychotherapy as part of the humanistic psychology movement, for instance in Person-centred and Gestalt approaches to psychotherapy, which often pride themselves in their existential origins. Personal-construct therapies also have a basis in the phenomenological approach and there are a number of psychoanalytic writers who take existential ideas into account as well. All of these approaches however tend to focus on the intra-personal dimensions of human existence and they have formulated psychological theories that do not allow the philosophical dimension to come to the fore or to be central. Radical existential psychotherapy focuses on the inter-personal and supra-personal dimensions, as it tries to capture and question people's world-views. Such existential work aims at clarifying and understanding personal values and beliefs, making explicit what was previously implicit and unsaid. Its practice is primarily philosophical and seeks to enable a person to live more deliberately, more authentically and more purposefully, whilst accepting the limitations and contradictions of human existence. It has much in common with the newly developed practice of philosophical consultancy, which is just finding its feet in Germany, the Netherlands, Israel and the United States (Lahav 1995, Achenbach 1984, Hoogendijk 1991).

There continues to be a lack of systematic theorizing about existential psychotherapy and a lack of research to demonstrate the effectiveness of this kind of work. This is mostly because the existential approach resists formalisation and opposes the fabrication of a method that can be taught as a technique and followed automatically. Existential psychotherapy has to be reinvented and recreated by every therapist and with every new client. It is essentially about investigating human existence and the

particular preoccupations of one individual and this has to be done without preconceptions or set ways of proceeding. There has to be complete openness to the individual situation and an attitude of wonder that will allow the specific circumstances and experiences to unfold in their own right. We can however distinguish a number of themes that will predictably emerge in this process. The following list of existential issues is a personal selection based on the compilation of the work of the major philosophers of existence. The order in which the issues are presented and discussed is based on my experience of teaching trainee psychotherapists some of the predictable patterns that emerge when clients in psychotherapy present their concerns and begin to examine their lives in a philosophical manner. Of course life is a great deal more complex than this list suggests and one can look at the same issues in many different ways. What follows is a brief description of my particular pathway towards clarity. It is important to remember that existential psychotherapists aim to assist their clients in finding their own.

EXISTENTIAL ISSUES

- **Ontological description**

The first thing to keep in mind when applying philosophy to psychotherapeutic practice is that when philosophers think about human living they do so not as anthropologists or psychologists. They do not primarily preoccupy themselves with concrete experiences, but they rather allow themselves to build theories about human living in an abstract sense. They are concerned to describe the ontological dimension of life and only secondarily come to the concrete experience of the individual. They try to pinpoint what it is that makes human living possible and difficult in the first place. Ontological descriptions are thus descriptions that tell us what the *sine qua non* of human existence is. They sketch out the conditions without which there would be no real human life. It is extremely useful to ask oneself what the basic foundations of human living are. Heidegger's book *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1927) is just such an attempt at describing the essential being in the world of humans. His consideration of human beings as *Dasein*, or being-in-the-world, redefines questions of self and psychology as questions of living and philosophy. His sharp thinking about what makes human being possible provides a useful map of existence, which can certainly be argued with and revised, but which nevertheless asks important questions about people in general, allowing for a closer examination of the particular individual life afterwards. Of course there are many such possible maps and ontological theories to be found in philosophy. Existential philosophy is particularly focussed on the predictable dilemmas of human living that will be regularly encountered when doing psychotherapy.

- **Meaning of life**

According to Heidegger the most fundamental philosophical question is: 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' We do not actually know the answer to this question, but it remains a fundamental question to ask ourselves if we are going to be serious about examining human living from scratch. Clients ask themselves this question regularly and in particular they are unclear about the meaning of their own

life. Philosophers show such questioning to be necessary in order to become a self-reflective human being. Doubts about the meaning of life are the beginning of all philosophy. Doubt and wonder enable us to rediscover the miracle of being. Children have not lost this ability to wonder and they ask the question 'why' at the most inopportune moments. Adults tend to wonder about the meaning of life particularly when things are difficult and no longer self-evident. Once upon a time the meaning of life was given by religion or by social rule. These days meaning is often looked at in a far more sceptical manner (see Tantam, this volume). It is therefore not surprising that people often find themselves in what we can be called a vacuum of meaning (Frankl 1946,1955). The experience of meaninglessness becomes a major problem in many people's lives and it may lead to a number of concrete difficulties, which may look like personality problems or other forms of pathology. Psychotherapists, psychologists or psychiatrists often have considerable difficulties in recognizing the validity of philosophical questioning. They are reluctant to engage in theoretical discussions with clients and patients who are seemingly disturbed, but who actually may be in search of meaning. We can only engage in such discussions if we have been willing to question our own lives and can recognize that anxieties and doubts about meaning do not have to be equated with personal pathology or mental illness (Szasz 1961, 1965, 1992).

It is by no means easy to be truly available to help others in finding meaning in their lives when their existence is in crisis. The meaning of life is never given and can not be transmitted unless a person is willing to search for it independently. Phenomenologists recognized that meaning making is one of the defining characteristics of human consciousness. It could therefore be argued that the meaning of human living is to learn to give it meaning. In order to come to a position from which we can learn to give meaning we have to first come to a point of doubt and a realization of the lack of intrinsic meaning in our lives. Frankl (1946) spoke of three sources of meaning. Firstly through taking from the world what is there, learning to savour and appreciate what is already given to us, as in aesthetic enjoyment of nature or the pleasures of the senses. Secondly to give to the world and add new enjoyments to it through acts of our own creativity and by giving to others in this way as well. Thirdly by our attitudinal values, which could include suffering, when it is necessary to endure the harsh conditions we may be exposed to. If there is no alternative to our suffering, it is always possible to find an attitude of human dignity by enduring the hard labour, pain and disappointments, Frankl argues, even when we have to face up to extremes of torture and deprivation.

- **Existential anxiety**

The experience of meaninglessness and the creation of meaning are closely related to the experience of Angst or existential anxiety. This occurs against the backdrop of the personal realization that I am ultimately alone in the world and that I have to contend with my mortality and other limitations, taking responsibility for myself in the face of endless challenges and confusions. This crisis of meaning was first described by Kierkegaard (1844, 1855), who thought that it was a great deal preferable to begin to feel anxious about life and question it, rather than to live in the despair of those who deny the need to think for themselves. Kierkegaard thought

that human beings would only gradually become capable of such questioning. He believed that people are vegetative to start out with, not taking much notice of the meaning of anything at first. They then grow sentient as they are beginning to follow their senses and relate more intensely to the world. After this they grow conscious of the world around them and as they begin to form judgements about things, eventually they become knowing about some of what is. Out of knowing can grow self-knowing as we apply the ability to think and recognize, compare and judge for ourselves. Out of self-knowing can come a self-awareness that leads to autonomy and the ability to make choices and decisions for oneself. This process plunges us into Angst, or existential anxiety, likened by Kierkegaard to a dizziness of freedom. He thought that experiencing Angst was the sine qua non of us assuming our responsibility as individuals and that without it we could never come face to face with the demands our life makes on us.

Anxiety or Angst is a core concept in existential philosophy, which sees it as the basic ingredient of vitality. Learning to be anxious in the right way, i.e. not too much or too little is the key to living a reflective, meaningful human life. As Kierkegaard put it:

Whoever has learnt to be anxious in the right way has learnt the ultimate.
(Kierkegaard 1844:155)

Anxiety has to be distinguished from fear. The former is a generalized feeling of Unheimlichkeit (Heidegger 1927), of not being at ease, or at home in one's world, whereas the latter has a concrete object. It is anxiety that allows us to define ourselves as a separate person and to become responsive and responsible as well as aware and alert. Although we may become overwhelmed with anxiety, so that it becomes counterproductive, on the whole anxiety is to be seen as a positive breakthrough towards the goal of the fully lived human life.

- **How are we to live our lives?**

In this sense existential psychotherapy does not reassure people when they come to talk about the predicaments and conflicts in their lives. They are encouraged to consider their anxiety and their problems as a valid starting point for the work that has to be done. When people wonder what is wrong with their life it is tempting to treat such questioning as symptomatic of emotional problems, but existential psychotherapy sees it as an attempt at coming to grips with philosophical dilemmas. Most of us are all likely to encounter such dilemmas sooner or later and people should be assisted in getting clarity on how they want to live when such issues arise. People easily lose their sense of direction. Moral and ethical issues are increasingly obscure in the world we live in today. It may be helpful to turn to Nietzsche's challenge (Nietzsche 1883) that we should re-value all values. He insisted that our thinking had gone astray and that much that people took for granted had to be reconsidered. He thought it crucial to consider afresh what a good human life consists of. In order to do so it is useful to turn to the map of human existence that

can be pieced together from the writings of existential philosophers, so that we can find our way through the obstacles of human living without losing our bearings.

- **Intentionality**

The lynchpin of human existence is the concept of intentionality. It was Husserl's phenomenology that established intentionality as its new foundation following Brentano's original idea (Husserl 1900, 1913, 1929). Phenomenology posits that human consciousness is essentially transparent and in this sense is always and necessarily connected to a world. It is never independent and always has an object. As we are non-substantial, transparent, beings we cannot but reach out to a world. We are always in relation. Through us the world comes to light. We always, think, do, desire, imagine something. There always is some contents to our mind. It is possible to set aside our automatic ways of intending things and judging things and take heed of our tendency to do so. We can learn to be disciplined about our intentionality and through the phenomenological reduction question all the automatic judgements we normally take for granted. Husserl called this process 'coming to things themselves' and it is often referred to as the epoche. It consists of putting our usual assumptions about the world in brackets. This does not mean that we get rid of them or pretend they do not exist, but rather that we deal with them separately so that we can describe the situation, object of our attention or other person we are dealing with fairly and as it really is. To make oneself consistently query one's assumptions about the world and reconsider it with a cleared attitude of openness is obviously extremely relevant to the practice of psychotherapy. What we find when we apply this manner of observing other people is that they themselves are always in a relationship of intentionality to the world they live in. It is their mode of being in the world that we need to turn to next.

- **Lived world**

Husserl spoke of the Lebenswelt, or lived world to describe the sort of universe that we live in. Everyone has their own perspective on the world, their own particular point of reference their own atmosphere and outlook. The lived world of the cat is obviously different to that of the dog or the bird for instance. When a cat comes into a room it may seek out cosy hiding places, while a dog may orientate himself by his sense of smell, looking for good spots to lift a leg on, whereas a bird might be focused on finding high places to perch on. The same room would seem a very different place to different people. In an even more complex manner they have a world of their own. This world determines where people go and what they want and do. Heidegger (1927) described the human world in quite a lot of detail, showing it to always have a horizon, a home ground and a foreign ground. We are always at a certain distance from things, although our relation to things might be determined by our intentional stance towards them more than by the actual space that separates us. When I run for the bus for instance, it seems closer to me than the ground that I run over. I see it as near and if it suddenly pulls out the severance that I experience and the sudden distance between me and the object of my desire may plunge me into confusion and disappointment. To describe the experiences of my world as completely as possible and without the usual assumption that I already know what I am describing leads to new insights into what human living entails.

- **Situations**

We discover immediately that people are always connected to the world in a number of concrete ways. Heidegger in this context spoke of our 'thrownness'. He said that we are always thrown into a world that is already there to start with and into which we simply get inserted. It is important to recognize the factual situations that we are confronted with. We are part of a certain culture, a certain environment with a particular climate and history, a certain society and a specific situation. It is only within the givens of that situation that we can exercise our own choices. Sartre (1943) called this our facticity and he recognized that we can never release ourselves from this, even though we can choose our position in relation to it. In terms of psychotherapy it also means that it may be necessary to look at people's problems in a structural way. Instead of seeing everything as the person's personal, emotional or internal problem, problems can be seen as part of an overall situation. Context is crucial and has to be taken into account.

- **Limit situations**

Of all the situations in which we can find ourselves there are certain ones that are irrevocable. These situations have to be accepted. We cannot avoid them or overcome them: we have to learn to live with them. Heidegger emphasised the importance of death as a marker of our finite nature. Death in this sense is not to be taken as something happening to us at some point later, but as something that is relevant to us right now. The realities of our mortality and of our incompleteness have to be faced for us to become aware of and true to our nature, which is to be finite. Heidegger considered that the reality of our death is that it completes us. The recognition of the inevitability of death gives us a certainty that nothing else can give us. The fear in the face of death allows us to claim back our individuality, our authentic being, as we are inevitably alone in death and find ourselves much sobered and humbled by the knowledge of our mortality. Death, according to Heidegger:

amounts to the disclosedness of the fact that Dasein exists as thrown being towards its end. (Heidegger 1927:251)

In other words: death is part of me and to accept my living towards this end gives my life back to me in a new way.

Jaspers (1951, 1971) spoke of limit situations as those situations, which define our humanity. Sooner or later we inevitably come up against guilt, death, pain, suffering and failure. The philosophical take on this is that we should encourage people to come to terms with some of the inevitable conflicts and problems of living whilst also asking themselves how they can move forward in a new and desirable direction. Limit situations are what bring us in confrontation with ourselves in a decisive and fundamentally disturbing way. They evoke anxiety and therefore release us from our tendency to be untrue and evasive about ourselves and our lives.

- **Self-deception**

Sartre was particularly adamant that as human beings we try to pretend that we are solid and definite in the way that objects are. People do not like to face up to their fundamental nothingness and mortality. We think we can pretend to be like a stone or a solid thing, but in fact in doing so we are deceiving ourselves, reinventing ourselves in bad faith (Sartre 1943). To be in bad faith is an almost unavoidable state of play for human beings as we seem to find it particularly difficult to face up to the implications of our freedom as consciousness. One of the objectives of human living is to become increasingly aware of our ability to choose to live deliberately rather than by default and to diminish the extent to which we seek to tell ourselves false stories about ourselves. Sartre said that the only choice we do not have is not to choose because not to choose involves a choice as well.

In fact we are a freedom which chooses, but we do not choose to be free.
(Sartre 1943:485)

The coward is fulfilling the project of cowardice, in the same way in which the hero is fulfilling the project of heroism. They can both either choose to take responsibility for their choice or pretend that it just happened to them and is not open to question.

Heidegger saw the existence of other people, with whom we are fallen into a world where the anonymous 'They' decides about our actions and our identity as the major obstacle to authenticity. He recognized, as Sartre did, that human beings are condemned to living inauthentically for much of the time, but that we should nevertheless aim to retrieve ourselves from inauthenticity. It is the anxiety of our possible death and our discovery that we are alone in the face of our own fate and destiny that allows us ultimately to take ourselves seriously and posit ourselves firmly, resolutely as individuals facing death.

- **Time**

This is when it also becomes possible to become more aware of the dimension of time, which is a crucial category of human living. It is always today and not tomorrow or yesterday. I am always no longer and not yet. We orientate ourselves in relation to the various ways in which we stand out in time. Our lives are a constant process of transformation that we cannot stop. Heidegger spoke of the three ec-stasies of time (Heidegger 1927:329), which are the ways in which we stand out in the past, in the present and in the future. We go back to ourselves in terms of remembering the past. We let ourselves be encountered by the world in the present and we reach out towards ourselves in the future. The past (Erbe) is the legacy we go forward with and which we can recollect in different ways. This means that we can re-present the past to ourselves in a new and creative manner. The present is our fate (Schicksal), which we have the task to live out as fully as possible, obviously drawing on the legacy of the past and making ourselves present to our own fate by facing our limitations rather than hiding away in inauthenticity. The future is our destiny (Geschick) and the destination that we choose for ourselves in relation to what is available to us. Our destination is thus created from our legacy and our fate. All of my actions are full of the awareness of my temporal change. There is decay and development around me. Life consists of movement, transformation and action. All of

these are only possible in time. My existence is historic. It creates a story. How I create this story is of utmost importance. Existential psychotherapy is about retracing the story and reorienting a person in time.

- **The fragile self**

The way in which I tell my story is the way in which I create a self. Existential philosophy does not posit the notion of a fixed and determined self. There is no such thing as an essential solid self, only intentionality and being in the world. Sartre used to say that existence preceded essence. I come into the world first and exist and only after that do I create a self for myself out of my actions. The self is a window on the world and out of our living in time and standing out in the world we become what we are. Sartre went as far as to say that people were the sum of their actions. Therefore the choices we make are constitutive of the sort of person we become. We are constantly in the process of creating a self, yet when we try to capture this self, we realize it is as if we were trying to catch our shadow: it moves away from us and changes as we try to fix it. We cannot be a definitive something. Our stories change as we live and so we are changed too. As we saw before the only way in which we can believe in a self is by being in bad faith, i.e. by using self-deception. Any image we create of ourselves is in a sense a lie: it never tells the full story about who we are or could be. We have to re-create ourselves every day and to become aware of this is to become authentic and true to the self which isn't one. We are thus doomed to feel a sense of incompleteness as life requires us to try ever harder to be equal to what we are capable of, even though we can never achieve it.

- **Existential guilt**

Most of us will therefore have a frequent sensation of unease with ourselves. The awareness that we are not true to our full human ability and that we live inauthentically will lead to the experience of existential guilt. In existential guilt we hear the voice of our conscience and this must be taken extremely seriously. We are not guilty because we have fallen short by other people's standards or because we have behaved badly, but simply because we fall short as human beings. It is important to note that most existential philosophers assume that human living will inevitably expose us to falling short and therefore to feeling existential guilt. We are always indebted to life. We are always capable of being more alive, more open, more true to the potential of human consciousness than we actually are. We are therefore condemned to feel existential guilt, as we are condemned to feel existential anxiety; largely because we are, as Sartre said condemned to be free. Heidegger greatly valued the call of conscience which he believed to warn us of our existential guilt, thus bringing us back into confrontation with our human fate, allowing us to rediscover our authentic being.

The call is the call of care. Being guilty constitutes the Being to which we give the name of "care". (Heidegger 1927:333)

To become authentic requires us to take into account our essential ways of existing and conduct ourselves accordingly. All of these modalities of existence, which Heidegger refers to as the existentialia are consequences of our intentional nature.

- **Care**

Our intentional nature, and the nature of our consciousness as the place where being comes to light, as Heidegger put it, makes us care. People are the custodians of Being because they are nothing in themselves but need to reflect something, in order to fully exist. As transparent entities human beings are therefore condemned to care. The world always matters to us and we have to take account of our care for the world, which manifests in lots of different ways. It is therefore not the question whether we care, but how. Care is not to be understood as a negative or a positive, but rather as the inevitable mode of our relating to a world that is of importance to us. Heidegger speaks of care as manifesting as our concern for things and our solicitude for people. But our care also manifests in some specific ways in which we are in the world and relate to it.

- **Mood**

The fact that the world always matters to us is evident in the way in which we are always in a mood. We cannot be separate from the world, but always respond to it in a particular state of mind. Heidegger (1927: 134) called this: *Befindlichkeit*, or the way in which I find myself. This state of mind is a response to the atmosphere created between the world, and me by my care for what is happening in it. *Stimmung*, or attunement, is the way in which I respond to the atmospheres, the way in which, like a musical instrument I am attuned in a particular way to the world around me. Through my resonance with the world I disclose the world in a particular way. My mood colours the world as it is also coloured by it. My own being is disclosed in my moods at the same time as it discloses the world. Moods are therefore invaluable indicators of what is happening between my world and me. We can never not be in a mood and we cannot just stop a mood. We can only get out of one mood by getting into another. Sartre elaborated on this idea of the central position of mood or mode of being by describing emotions as active rather than passive. He spoke of emotion as a kind of magic by which I alter the world and therefore myself in one blow (Sartre 1939).

- **Understanding**

As human beings we can respond to the world through our emotions, but we can also through our emotions and our ability to reflect on them come to grasp things in a new way. This new way of understanding (*verstehen*) is not just about human intelligence and the capacity for calculating things in the world. Heidegger makes the distinction between *Vernunft* (rational mind) and *Verstand* (understanding) which is our ability to see the whole of what is rather than analyse things with our mind (Heidegger 1927:144). Understanding discloses the potential of our being, as it shows us what we are capable of. In his later work he made the distinction between calculative thinking and meditative thinking (Heidegger 1954). He showed how important it was to learn to think again in this more encompassing meditative manner where we are open to the world and receive it with gratitude for what is, rather than trying to subject it to the analysis and manipulations that our calculative mind imposes. Heidegger suggests that we use *Sicht*, or vision to understand the world and our relation to it. *Umsicht*, or the vision of looking around one, applies to objects

and we need to approach objects with the care of circumspection. We use *Rucksicht*, which suggests a kind of withholding, in relation to other people, which manifests as considerateness. Finally and perhaps most importantly we employ *Durchsicht*, or seeing through things in relation to ourselves. It is thus transparency that brings into being careful understanding of ourselves.

- **Discourse**

Language is an essential vehicle for understanding our modes of being. Heidegger speaks of discourse as the third essential mode of being (together with mood and understanding). Discourse is a broader concept than language and includes it. Although discourse is obviously linked to language it can also manifest as silence. We have to struggle to retrieve valuable discourse out of all the possible misuses of talking. Speech can turn to idle talk (*Gerede* rather than *Rede*). Discourse can flounder in curiosity, which is a moving across the surface of things, distracted by their novelty, as we collect and accumulate useless information. In this way we drown in existence and we go under in ambiguity. (Merleau Ponty 1945). Discourse is to be used carefully for it to become a valuable resource for the manifestation of being. In language or in silent thought we can capture and express ourselves in relation to life and begin to come to terms with our essential function of being the shepherds of being.

- **Communication**

The mastery of language makes human communication possible. However communication is a lot more complex than simple speech. Heidegger was aware that *Mitsein*, or being with others, was part of our essential nature. He also described people as at the mercy of the anonymous other who defines their being-in-the-world. Authentic being is only possible when we set ourselves aside from others. Sartre described our struggle with others as a desperate attempt at survival and at gaining a false sense of security. He saw human communication, which is by no means only about language as taking place either in a sadistic, a masochistic or an indifferent way. We can try to dominate the other or we can submit or withdraw from communication altogether. In sharp contrast to Sartre's pessimistic view of human relations and human communication the philosopher Martin Buber (1923,1929) saw the possibility of a more positive way of human interaction. He distinguished between I-it and I-Thou modes of relating. He noted that the way we relate to others determines what kind of person we become. In the I-It mode of relating I treat the other as an object and become an object myself. In this mode I see the other only for part of what the other is capable of and at the same time become partial myself. In the I-Thou mode I relate to the other for all the other is capable of and I relate thus with my whole being as well. The I-Thou mode of relating has a spiritual dimension. Buber described the way in which we create a space between others and ourselves. In this space human communication becomes a reality. He called this space the in-between. True dialogue can be created in this space when we release our self-reserve and reach out to the other with our whole being.

Where un-reserve has ruled, even wordlessly, between men, the word of dialogue has happened sacramentally. (Buber 1929:3-4).

- **Mastered irony**

Kierkegaard believed that language should be used with what he calls mastered irony. This requires the ability to detach oneself sufficiently from one's situation to be able to see oneself in some perspective. He claims that those who lack irony do not have even the beginning of a personal life. To have a personal life and be able to be objective about oneself and subjective about others is to Kierkegaard a primary objective.

Most men are subjective toward themselves and objective toward all others, frightfully objective sometimes-but the task is precisely to be objective toward oneself and subjective toward all others. (Kierkegaard 1967, IV 4542).

He distinguishes fanatics, who cling to certain beliefs and nihilists who deny all beliefs, but sees them both as lacking in courage. In mastered irony one questions one's own beliefs while still being committed to them. As usual the challenge is to be able to live in the tension between opposites.

- **Paradox**

This idea that human living takes place in the tension between opposing forces is present throughout existential philosophy. Most obviously this is represented by Heidegger's (1927) description of the tension between life and death, or by Sartre's descriptions of the tension between being and nothingness, expressed in the tension between being-for-itself (the being of consciousness) and being-in-itself (the being of objects) (Sartre 1943). Kierkegaard for his part described this tension as one between the infinite and the finite. He claimed that one can get too much drawn into either the finite or the infinite and that the challenge of living is to maintain the right sort of tension between both. The person who is immersed in the finite gets caught up in the dangers of concrete living. The person who gets too immersed in the infinite is the dreamer, who merges with the universe and becomes either overwhelmed or terrified or depressed by it ending up feeling alienated from everyday reality. Kierkegaard thought it was important to be capable of modulating between the two extremes. Merleau Ponty was equally aware of the paradoxical nature of human living and he firmly believed that we have to live with what amounts to an essential ambiguity (Merleau Ponty 1945, 1968).

- **The four dimensional force field**

In this force field of opposites there are a number of different dimensions of experience. Systematic descriptions of human experience have outlined four dimensions. Heidegger spoke of the different dimensions as those of earth, world, man, and gods (Heidegger 1957). Binswanger (1946,1963) spoke of the Umwelt (environment), Mitwelt (world with others) and Eigenwelt (personal world), whilst a spiritual dimension (Uberwelt) is also implied in his work (van Deurzen-Smith 1984). In essence philosophers have recognized that human experience is multiple and complex and takes place on a number of different levels. Firstly there is our involvement in a physical world of objects, where we struggle between survival and

death. Secondly there is our activity in a social world of other people, where we struggle with the contradictions between our need to belong and the possibility of our isolation. Thirdly there is a personal dimension where we grapple with the tension between integrity and disintegration. Finally there is a spiritual dimension where we seek to find meaning against the threat of meaninglessness. On each of these dimensions we have to learn to stand in the tension between opposites, discovering that we cannot have life without death, love without hate, identity without confusion, and wisdom without doubt. As Paul Tillich once said:

The courage of confidence takes the anxiety of fate as well as the anxiety of guilt into itself (Tillich 1952:163).

CONCLUSION

- **A dialectical approach.**

Approaching psychotherapy from an existential perspective is to see that a dialectical process manages all these tensions of human existence. Conflicts are constantly generated and then overcome, only to be reasserted in a new form. Paradoxes are inevitable and life flows out of contradictory forces working against and with each other. The existential psychotherapist has as primary task to recognize together with the client the specific tensions that are at work in the client's life. This requires a process of careful scrutiny and description of the client's experience and a gradually growing familiarity with the client's particular situation and stance in the world. To understand the worldview and the states of mind that this generates is to grapple with the way the client makes meaning, which involves a coming to know of clients' values and beliefs. The particular circumstances of the client's life are recognized, as is their wider context. The psychotherapeutic process of existential therapy is then to elicit, clarify and put into perspective all the current issues and contradictions that are problematic. Part of the work consists in enabling the client to come to terms with the inherent contradictions of human living. Another part of it is to help clients find a satisfactory direction for their future life with a full recognition of the paradoxes that have to be faced in the process. Ultimately the therapeutic search is about allowing the client to reclaim personal freedom and a willingness and ability to be open to the world in all its complexity. Authentic living with courage (Tillich 1952) and in humility would be a suitable existential objective. Learning to reflect for oneself and communicate effectively with others is another (Buber 1923, 1929). As mentioned before existential psychotherapy can take many different shapes and forms, but it always requires a philosophical exploration of what is true for the client. When this exploration is conducted satisfactorily and fully it often leads to a greater recognition of what is true for human beings in general, affording the beginning of a genuinely philosophical stance, which may make it easier to tackle life's inevitable darkness and adversity. In time it may even lead to that elusive objective of all philosophy that makes everything worthwhile, ordinary, hard earned, human wisdom.

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