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## Existential Topology

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Our human life cycle is a unit - from conception to death. How our life is shaped, biologically (zygote, blastocyst, embryo in chorionic vesicle, foetus, umbilical cord, placenta, newborn baby to death), finds a homology in the way, psychologically, we shape ourselves.

This proposition may appear either a banality, or a startlingly fresh realization. The possible newness about it is the precision whereby existential situations in adult life, are expressed in a topology, which when all content is abstracted, matches in structural abstract, prenatal situations. For instance, a lady dreams that she is in a room: she absolutely cannot stay in it longer: she absolutely cannot get out. There is a door. But the door is blocked by an irremovable umbrella! What are we to make of this? Room: (=uterus), door (=cervix), umbrella (=placenta praevia and umbilical cord). I wish to call your attention to these morphological correspondences and to invite you to ponder upon them.

The following are three examples which epitomise three different existentially-felt situations of adult life.

Over the past twenty-seven years adult people have described their body-image or body-schema to me in terms which I shall condense into the following formulas.

1) I am a sphere, a ball, a balloon. I am hollow. I have no arms, no legs, no teeth. I have nothing to stand on, to grip with, or bite with. I do not feel myself to have a front, back, up, down, or laterality. I am not on the ground, or rooted, I float, fly, spin. Sensations come from everywhere. It is all undifferentiated energy, basically. I have difficulty often in distinguishing what is sight, sound, taste, touch smell. It is as though all I am is a spherical eye. It is as though the macrocosm is a spherical surface upon which I project myself (I am the sky, the stars, the sun, the moon).

This description could be developed at great length. It is clear that it corresponds closely to well-known world views in which the spherical kernel of oneself is the microcosm of the macrocosmic sphere (the universe) and that microcosm and macrocosm comprise an intimate system of correspondence.

2) I am a sponge deeply underwater. I have no way of moving out of what I am in, but I am both in and what is around me: that is both of me, and not me. All I can do is breathe, with the whole of me: expand, contract.

What would you do if you could really let go? I asked one young man. "I would cringe" he replied.

3) There are another set of existential issues which are shaped in terms of being connected or cutoff.

I refer to the experience of some children and adults of being (literally physically) connected to or disconnected from others. I shall instance two polarities, experienced negatively in those terms. A lady of twenty-four has been advised to have a colostomy for ulcerative colitis. When she walks away from her mother, more than a mile or so, in any direction, she feels tugged by a cord inserted into her guts. Every step is an increasing effort to move away. She can sit only on the edge of a chair, and then only with the greatest precaution, in case she may never be able to get up and go out again, because she feels attached by a cord to the chair within instants of sitting upon it.

A man in his mid-twenties has spent his life longing for, and dreading, eye contact. Suddenly across a table in a cafe his eyes meet a friend of his. He looks and is looked at, instantaneously for the first time he can remember. He loses sense of self, place, time for a few minutes.

As he begins to recover himself he has an "irrational" desire to kiss the man whose eyes have intertwined with his. But he does not. Within seconds he is "out" of it. Back into the state he regards as "normal" for him. "Cut off", unconnected.

These three examples, stripped of content, present an abstract topology which, clothed again with another content, give us the following correspondences.

sphere	←→	blastocyst
sponge	←→	chorionic vesicle
connection	←→	umbilical cord

In a recent publication "The Facts of Life" (Einaudi, Pantheon, Penguin) I presented some data along these lines to take, as it were, the temperature of the scientific water. It was very cold.

Under both these circumstances it seems to me imprudent to go further, and at the moment, we have little space.

So I signal briefly, three points arising from the above.

i) Where someone, as an adult, is "at", is often expressed in a topological scheme, which bears remarkable correspondences to precise phases of embryonic morphology.

ii) The premises of the psychological statement, in its precise correspondence to a biological locus, reinforces the view of our life cycle as a unit from conception to death and the amazing economy of nature, of never multiplying patterns unnecessarily.

iii) It presents us with a map whereby we can locate in a person's own terms, where he or she is existentially. Many people have not been conceived, not been implanted or adopted, have not grown and developed, have not been born.

D. W. Winnicott, under whom I was in supervision for four years, in the course of my psychoanalytic training, often made the point to me that prenatal life was "the key" to mythology, and vice versa. I offer this paper in memory of and in gratitude to him and I hope he would have felt that these considerations were worthy of the time he spent on me.

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*I am. This is where I begin.  
I grow. This is how I change.  
I love. This relates me to you.  
I fear. This protects me, but  
no cause to stop*

*I am. This is where I begin.  
I grow. This is how I change.  
I love. This relates me to you.  
I fear. This protects me, but no cause to stop being,  
growing or loving.*

*My body is me. It is also the beautiful steed  
to carry me to the future.  
My senses delight to fill in the complete spectrum  
of all that can be gleaned.  
My mind free from the aberrant confines which  
would lose my spirit in a morass,  
Expands awarely into communion with those who also dare  
To step out into the trackless growth  
To a blossoming beyond any imagined fulfilment.*

**Joe Billington**