
WHY THE EXISTENTIAL APPROACH MIGHT BE ENOUGH AFTER ALL

by
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John Rowan's analysis of humanistic psychotherapy is at first glance an attractive one. I could agree with it if, instead of referring to a regressive and an existential stream, it referred to a regressive and an experiential stream. Most of John's criticisms of the existential approach seem valid to me as a criticism of experientially based approaches that focus on the here and now exclusively. Any work with clients that limits itself to the most immediate preoccupations and present feelings is bound to miss out a wealth of other experience. For my part, my criticism would extend to some of the regressive approaches that limit themselves all too often to working with superficially available reactive material. Even though the work may concern past trauma it is in the case often very much centred around abreaction and re-experience in the here and now of the past event. The limitations of such approaches are not just that they often fail to encourage the clients' understanding and integration of past or present difficulties, but also that they can in fact encourage a one-sided appraisal of such difficulties and provide clients with clichés to hang on to and repeat to themselves rather than provoke thought.

As far as I can see, most humanistic approaches that claim to have existential roots are misinterpreting the ideas that are basic to a genuinely existential way of working. The focus on the here and now for instance, is in no way dictated by an existential approach. An existential approach is to be focused on living; living is about creating a future out of the givens of the past. An existential approach therefore has to consider the past as much as the present and the future. A careful consideration of the existential literature will immediately show how important it is to make such connections in time, rather than live with the illusions of the present and the present exclusively (see for instance Heidegger's basic work: *Being and Time*. Heidegger 1927) In many ways an existential approach is far closer to psychoanalysis than to any other therapeutic approach as both strive to come to as complete as possible an understanding of the whole of a person's life and encourage and assist her in working through all this material in a thorough manner. Boss and Binswanger have made this close relationship between an existential approach and psychoanalysis

abundantly clear (Boss 1957: May et al 1958)

Of course some of the existential ideas that were most attractive were popularized in the sixties and seventies, particularly in the U.S.A. and often in the form of new therapies. Most often the emphasis was placed on the notion of individual freedom and responsibility and on the desirability for people to make active choices in their lives and increase their awareness of the possibility for doing so. Thus consciousness raising and individual growth became the objective and new techniques for enhancing these were invented regularly. All of this, no matter how appealing, has little left in common with radical existential analysis.

A true existential approach aims for a minimum of gimmicks and artificial tools. Its technique is as simple as a therapeutic approach can be. It rests entirely on providing a fundamental framework within which therapist and client together can explore how the latter experiences herself, life and the world around her. This is done by setting some clear boundaries which will regulate the world with regards to time, place, mode of work, exchange of money for professional services etc. The work is done by verbal analysis and understanding of all material and in this process the therapist is to work as a fully available mentor, rather than as a technician or a friend or a distant consultant. (see van Deurzen-Smith 1984)

So far the resemblance with psychoanalytic therapy is obvious. The main difference is on a philosophical level. The ideological framework for understanding the client's experience is a philosophical one in the case of an existential approach, whereas it is a biological/psychological one in the case of psychoanalysis. Therefore working in an existential manner will involve assisting clients in clarifying their basic assumptions, their essential values and their personal mode of being in the world. It will not zoom in on symptoms but it will pay much attention to how people can make life more meaningful. Finding purpose in authentic ways of living could sum up the aim of an existential approach.

As I have already mentioned, such a project will inevitably involve a lot of work on past experience and past perceptions, past projects and past disappointments. There is, however, an important difference between seeing past experience as having determined one's present predicament or seeing past experience as having determined one's present predicament or seeing one's past experience as the expression of a mode of existence which may still presently create trouble. In the latter case, there is not necessarily a causal connection. As an illustration of this point one can think for instance of the client who consults a therapist because he regularly experiences violent headaches when confronted with aggressive behaviour. In the process of the

therapy it transpires that his parents used to be fairly aggressive with him when he was a small boy. In fact he had become expert at ignoring his father's ironic remarks and his mother's frequent thrashings if he did something that she considered wrong. He had soon become totally stoical under the verbal and physical insults, apart from the headaches he started experiencing each time that such an occurrence had taken place.

Now, if one were to work with this client on the abreactive level, encouraging him to discharge his feelings (present or past) about the presumed authors of his discomfort (his parents in the past and any other person frustrating him in the present) one would simply encourage this client's belief in the pattern of causality behind his headaches. In other words, he would quite easily see himself as the victim of a basic injustice and he might work himself up to retaliate in overtly violent ways rather than covertly responding with a violent headache. There is little doubt that such work would bring as initial relief to this client. Much pent-up energy, resentment and self-pity would be channelled into some form of action.

Humanistic methods would do little more than this. What they would have in common with a psychoanalytic approach and a behavioural approach, would be to assume that the distress of this person is directly generated through a past event. Some form of past trauma

would be seen as the cause for a whole string of more recent developments, leading to the present phase of frequent and violent headaches.

From an existential perspective this would seem like a reductionistic and implausible hypothesis. The emphasis would be not on what happened in the present and in the past to produce the symptom, but on how this particular person responded to this set of givens. Without denying that some events are intrinsically traumatic, trauma is seen as one of the facts of life. Everyone will inevitably get their share of trauma, whether fair or not, and what matters is whether one goes under or whether one rises to its challenge. The client with the violent headache may very well have been treated badly by his parents. In fact it is highly likely, as people are bound to get exposed to a good dose of parental injustice in their childhood, as being unjust is an inevitable part of parenting. The question is not whether the client was traumatised or how they were traumatised: the question is how they responded to the situation and how they still respond today in similar situations. It is highly likely that he would have encountered a similar unfair situation sooner or later in life, even if his parents had been more fair. As his brother, also exposed to these extremes of verbal and physical disrespect, responded very differently (by becoming a tough customer with great stamina and physical fitness) the client could see some sense in the view that it doesn't matter much what is done

to you, as what you yourself make of your experience.

Of course this is not saying that being unjust to people is right as it will challenge and strengthen them. It is simply saying that as it is highly unlikely that people will ever be able to be only good and just with one another, it is a very limiting perspective to want to analyse all the occasions that one has been exposed to trauma in order to find the cause of one's current troubles. What is needed is a rather more spirited (not spiritual) approach that allows one to go beyond the simple laws of cause and effect and come to some insight into the basic difficulties that life will predictably expose one to.

In order to do this, it is still necessary to investigate people's perceptions and experience of the wrong they imagine has been done them. Most of what therapists of all different convictions do is useful in some way and goes in the direction of an understanding of what life is all about. What an existential approach wants to avoid, however, is to pin people down to a particular way of viewing themselves. Instead it wants to encourage them to broaden and widen their perspective. In this sense, an exclusively causal view would be too limiting.

There is nothing wrong with depth explorations. There is nothing wrong either with here and now work. There is much to be said for an exploration of a person's purpose. The trick is however to

go beyond all of that and come to a wider perspective which can encompass human existence in its totality. This is what an existential approach aims for. Not to be yet another enclave in the therapeutic domain, not to fight against specific approaches, but to consider the truth in each and to proceed towards a more complete picture of being human,.

In doing this, the unconscious is not so much denied as its contradictions are pointed out. Sartre never dismissed the notion that some aspects of mental life are not directly accessible at the surface. He simply objected to the idea that some things could be described as unconsciously motivating us, in spite of ourselves. He preferred to refer to the distinction between reflexive and non-reflexive consciousness, reserving the possibility of turning one's attention, if necessary, to whatever would have temporarily been out of one's consciousness. This is not simply another way to describe the pre-conscious, although it covers that as well. It involves a much more laborious process (of existential analysis) to bring out the most minute moods and undercurrents of one's experience in order to gain access to that level of awareness where one's motivations and original project become increasingly clear. This process is a life-long and arduous one, not one to be achieved by artificial gimmicks and techniques in a few years of psychotherapy. (Sartre 1956, 1962)

For some, psychoanalysis develops into a very similar project, becoming a way of life rather than a therapy. Much can be learnt from its methods as much can also be gained from a serious understanding of less in-depth approaches. The point of the existential approach is to provide a philosophical framework where mere eclecticism would have devastating and ultimately confusing effects. (see Van Deurzen-Smith 1988)

I do not believe that there are only two or even three or four camps of psychotherapy and counselling. I believe that it is necessary to recognise any form of human endeavour as a partial contribution to a more complete understanding. For me, the existential, or the philosophical, approach must therefore be the way forward to such a culmination of wisdom, experience and insight into what life is and can be.

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ORCHIDS

Orchid petals,
Amber yellow,
Fall.
I kicked them
And that was today
Adrian Tomkinson.
