Self & Society, 2016
Vol. 44, No. 2, 134–141, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03060497.2016.1202401

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Depressive Realism: an existential response

John Pollard*

Integrative counsellor and trainer in private practice, Bury St Edmunds and Cambridge, UK

Existentialism and Depressive Realism (DR) share some important concerns, most notably meaninglessness, absurdity, death, self-deception and free will/freedom. Within existential philosophy and therapy there is an understanding of the difficult givens of being human. However, because these difficulties relate to our freedom and possibilities, existentialism, unlike DR, can offer a positive and hopeful response. Unlike DR, most of which seems to affirm an essentialist view of 'truth' and 'reality', existentialism prioritizes our 'way' of 'being' over an essential human nature, which leads to an openness to individual human experience, likely to include positive elements.

Keywords: Depressive Realism; existentialism; meaninglessness; death; freedom; authenticity

> What a terrible world, what a beautiful world.
>
> —'12/17/12′ by The Decembrists

> Overhead a rainbow appears
> In black and white
>
> —'National Shiteday' by Half Man Half Biscuit

Depressive Realism (DR) states that human existence is 'essentially' depressing or, in Thomas Ligotti's words, 'malignantly useless' (2010), and any positive challenges to this are a consequence of denial and ignorance.

According to Colin Feltham:

> There is no clear DR lineage or consensus but most of these are loosely united by a pessimistic, disenchanted view of life as meaningless, by acute awareness of death and disappointment, disdain for absurd social arrangements, radical scepticism about the reality of the self and free will, respect for antinatalism, understanding of suicide, and refusal of false solutions. (Feltham, 2016, this issue)

A pessimistic outlook and an exploration of the darker side of human existence are also well-known stereotypes of existentialism. These stereotypes include a morbid preoccupation with death, anguish and angst, the burden of guilt and responsibility, the inherent conflict in our relationships, and a sense of meaninglessness and absurdity. There is 'some' truth in these existential stereotypes but there is also much more to the philosophy and, of course, the therapy carried out in its name.

*Email: jpollardtherapy@yahoo.co.uk

© 2016 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

I will take DR as broadly incorporating the same individuals and themes that Feltham identifies. Figures such as Peter Wessel Zapffe and Thomas Ligotti could both be seen as being on the radical, extreme wing of DR, while John Gray and Feltham could both be described as 'moderates'. In fact, Ligotti states that to label Gray's *Straw Dogs* 'as pessimistic is an overreaction on the part of those who would remain mere dabblers in actuality' (2010, p. 233).

What counts as existential philosophy can also be controversial. I adopt the position taken by many in the academic existential philosophical world and will focus here on early Heidegger and Sartre (Crowell, 2012). In terms of the existential therapeutic field, one could say that it is both richly diverse *and* problematically fragmented: just compare Emmy van Deurzen, Irvin Yalom and Ernesto Spinelli's work, or have a look at Barnett and Madison's fascinating *Existential Therapy: Legacy, Vibrancy and Dialogue* (2012).

Destructive suffering beings

John Gray sees human evolution as essentially problematic. He questions the assumption that the human species is one that is continually evolving in a positive way. In *Straw Dogs* (2002) his attack is explicitly on humanism, which for Gray involves a naive, exaggerated view of human nature, which celebrates a much bigger difference between humans and other animals than actually exists. Our destructive nature remains hidden, or ignored. Gray is pessimistic:

> It [mankind] seems fated to wreck the balance of life on earth – and thereby to be the agent of its own destruction. What could be more hopeless than placing the Earth in the charge of this exceptionally destructive species? (Gray, 2002, p. 17)

Part of the pessimism of DR can relate to the way humans have used and abused the planet. Gray sees our inherent destructiveness as being particularly potent when combined with scientific technological advances, one area where he acknowledges we have 'progressed'. He also states that '[i]mprovements in government and society are no less real, but they are temporary. History is not progress or decline, but recurring gain and loss' (2002, p. 155). We can note here that Gray's critique at least leaves open positive possibilities.

Given an acute sensitivity towards inherent difficulties in being human, there are various arguments within DR for a pessimistic view of procreation. Indeed, the question of population growth and natural resources worries many depressive realists to the extent that 'antinatalism' becomes a serious position for them. However, on the radical wing of DR you not only have the advocating of a personal decision not to reproduce, but an argument for the phasing out of the human race (Zapffe, 1933/2004), based on what seems to be the utilitarian goal of reducing suffering: 'no human beings equals no suffering' seems to be the preferred situation, rather than the inherent suffering involved in continuing human existence.

However, there is a problem of logic here. Phasing out the human race seems to be utopian, an ideal situation to bring about, because of the desire to rid ourselves of suffering. This utopian 'non-human' earth would have to come about because enough human beings chose this. But this makes little sense: how would that happen? It would imply a huge change in our humanity and a realization of suffering (and the truth of DR) that would, in itself, undermine the need to put in place a process of human extinction.

It makes much more sense to look seriously at the issue of natural resources, population and population control, along with environmental concerns. A purely existential view on procreation would probably limit a response to an individual's own reflective decision, perhaps with authenticity in mind: looking at one's individual motives and reasons behind this decision. Perhaps most existentialists would at least think a considered exploration of procreation would make sense, rather than a simple assumption about its rightness or wrongness.

Nihilism and meaninglessness

The title of a 2006 book by David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, is an example of an extreme view in DR, but there seems to be an inherent irrelevance and absurdity in terms of an existing individual exploring for themselves whether it would be better if they hadn't been born. How can the question be asked logically? The poser of the question cannot logically answer the question as they have already been born – it is not a state they can now choose. If you ask the question based on your own suffering and experience, you then have to decide what your answer means to you *now*: granted, it might help you look at what is important and meaningful. It may lead to the question of whether one's life is worthwhile and whether one should end it or not, a question Albert Camus took seriously in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1986).

Camus sees the meaning of life as the 'most urgent of questions', as believing that life has no meaning undermines our very existence and can lead to the question of suicide. Absurdity comes into this quandary, with the apparent indifference of the world to our desire for clear meaning: 'the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart' (1986, p. 26).

The absurdity of our existence would resonate with many within DR who would view an 'optimistic progressive' position as 'absurd', as there is a huge gap between an optimistic view of the future and the depressive reality of the human condition. But Camus remains optimistic; he draws from the absurd three consequences, which are 'my revolt, my freedom and my passion' (1986, p. 62). These three areas are classic existential concerns; a *freedom to revolt passionately* against the levelling down of everyday life. Jean-Paul Sartre, a contemporary and sometime colleague and friend of Camus, founded his version of existentialism on engagement and commitment, and it is this active nature of existential philosophy that is useful when exploring the question of meaning.

John Gray's take on this is interesting: 'It is practical men and women who turn to a life of action as a refuge from insignificance' (2002, p. 194). Perhaps refuge is only one possible motive for action, which might actually be 'for' something positive. Gray does say that '[s]earching for meaning in life may be useful therapy, but it has nothing to do with the life of the spirit. Spiritual life is not a search for meaning but a release from it' (2002, p. 197). Throughout his recent writings, Gray argues for a kind of Heideggerian releasement from conflict, a letting go, an approach that has something in common with Buddhism and the later writings of Heidegger (2010). Gray takes issue with our relentless drive for meaning: 'Other animals do not need a purpose in life. A contradiction to itself, the human animal cannot do without one. Can we not think of the aim of life as being simply to see?' (Gray, 2002, p. 199).

An existential view may be to affirm some kind of dynamic, or integrated, relationship between 'active' and 'meditative' being: Sartrean 'doing' and Heideggerian 'being' are perhaps compatible (see Cooper, 1999).

The existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom argues that pursuing meaning directly is limiting and can be self-defeating:

> When it comes to meaninglessness, the effective therapist must help patients to look away from the question: to embrace the solution of engagement rather than to plunge in and through the problem of meaninglessness … . One must immerse oneself in the river of life and let the question drift away. (Yalom, 1980, p. 483)

A response to the question of meaninglessness may also involve an ironic standpoint and, I would argue, should also include the associated experience of 'humour' – something understandably lacking from most DR, but also, alas, existential writing.

Self-deception and sublimation

An important work in DR is 'The Last Messiah' (1933/2004) by Peter Wessel Zapffe, who refers to our evolution as problematic; for Zapffe, it is how we differ from animals that marks out our central problem. 'One night in long bygone times, man awoke and saw himself.' Central to his diagnosis of human existence is our over-developed consciousness, the 'parent of all horrors', according to Thomas Ligotti (2010, p. 15), which involves a heightened and imaginative awareness of all our negativities, including suffering, our exploitation of nature, and our own certain deaths.

Zapffe cites four ways in which we deal with the problems associated with our existence, all of which involve 'artificially limiting the content of consciousness'. The first way is 'isolation', whereby we dismiss from consciousness 'all disturbing thought and feeling'. Second is 'anchoring', which gives us a false sense of security – perhaps through family, God, material objects, wealth, work, etc. Third is by 'distraction' and fourth 'sublimation', where we transform what is fearful into something manageable; a popular way would be by creative means. Zapffe includes himself in this category: 'The author does not suffer, he is filling pages and is going to be published in a journal' (1933/2004).

The question of illusion and self-deception can be seen throughout DR. The difficulty of acknowledging the depressive truth of being human is dealt with in various ways. It seems that, a bit like Heidegger's inauthenticity, we cannot resist ways of immersing ourselves back into the everyday world, so perhaps it is more about being aware of our own actions and the ways in which we are being inauthentic, or anchoring or sublimating. Gray writes that '[h]umans cannot live without illusion. For the men and women of today, an irrational faith in progress may be the only antidote to nihilism' (2002, p. 29). An alternative response may be to look seriously at the question of meaning: if nothing matters, then surely that doesn't matter either. Given the view that my life will end, and indeed everyone else's, this either makes my decisions meaningless or incredibly meaningful. DR veers towards the former, while existentialism holds out for the latter.

Freedom and determinism

The question of meaning connects with a fundamental difference between DR and existentialism: that of freedom and free will. Sartre's more provocative slogans have become central to the existential view of freedom: 'man is condemned to be free' and the 'incontestable author of their lives' (Sartre, 2003, p. 553). Indeed, for Sartre, freedom is not a possession: 'it is not a quality added on or a property of my nature. It is very exactly the stuff of my being' (2003, p. 553).

Gray's recent writing on free will and freedom is complex; at times he certainly sees them as being part of our illusions: 'It is not true that our experience compels us to think of ourselves as free agents. On the contrary, if we look at ourselves truthfully we know we are not' (2002, p. 43). However, in a more recent work, *The Soul of the Marionette* (2015), Gray does describe a kind of 'inner freedom' relating to embracing uncertainty and mystery. He also states that 'for the present and the future that can be clearly foreseen, it is only freedom that can be realized with each human being that can be secure' (2015, p. 162).

If indeed it is an illusion, free will is one with some illusory evidence and practical support. The argument against freedom and for determinism seems to make best sense in hindsight, or from a standpoint that views the human being as simply a physical entity like any other, and hence definable by cause and effect. One could argue that while there are many arguments on both sides of the free will/determinism debate, the best argument for believing in free will might be the practical one: imagine trying to live as though you had no free choices. How might that practically work for you?

Death and authenticity

Death plays a central part in DR and for many existentialists. For DR, death is a depressing fact, bringing into question what happens after our death (DRs tend to be atheists), the question of loss (of self and others), the fear of how we might physically suffer, of our fragility and impotence, and the possible undermining of any meaning. For Heidegger, death 'is possible at any moment' (1962, p. 302) and the uncertainty of its timing can create a debilitating anxiety. Much of this DR could affirm as evidence for a depressing reality.

However, not only could one argue that without death our lives would have little point, or meaningfulness, but it is death which many existentialists, most famously Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1962), view as the main path to authenticity. Authenticity is not an overwhelmingly positive joy but a sober one. He describes an authentic attitude to our death as 'an impassioned *freedom towards death* – a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the "they", and which is factical, certain of itself, and anxious' (1962, p. 311, original emphasis).

Heidegger's 'the they' or 'the one' refers to our everyday communal life, a world of shared meanings, objects and practices. For Heidegger, the tendency is that 'the they' reduces 'the possible options of choice to what lies within the range of the familiar, the attainable, the respectable – that which is fitting and proper' (1962, p. 239). This encourages a conformity, a 'tranquilization', although it is important to note that *we all* act in the everyday world in shared conformist ways (e.g. I drive a car like 'they' do, read a book like 'they' do, even 'rebel' like 'they' do); we cannot constantly resist the way we 'fall' into this everyday practical world, although there are degrees and different attitudes we can take towards it.

To 'find' ourselves in this everyday world involves a conscious awareness and resolve. It is an awareness and confrontation with one's own death that, particularly for Heidegger, makes authenticity possible, although the tendency is for us to flee from the anxiety this provokes, back into the everyday world of 'the they'. It is important to note here that death does not play a central part in Sartre's concept of authenticity or good faith: 'death is always beyond my subjectivity, there is no place for it in my subjectivity' (2003, p. 548).

The concept of authenticity in existential literature provides some positive responses to a pessimistic outlook on life, as it opens up future possibilities in a more reflective and personal way. Authenticity is not about being true to a fixed, core inner self; it is a process and ongoing struggle. It offers some ways of addressing what the philosopher David Cooper describes as our alienation from 'the world, from one's fellows, from oneself' (1999, p. 8), perhaps an alienation that DR argues for. However, as authenticity is a kind of openness to 'being', including our being-towards-death, some anxiety comes along with it. Therefore, while arguing that existential philosophy ultimately rejects an essential DR, its description of authenticity could be described as an 'anxious realism'.

Of course, while for Heidegger 'the non-relational character of death, as understood in anticipation, individualizes Dasein down to itself' (1962, p. 308), we remain with others:

> Resoluteness, *as authentic Being-one's-self*, does not detach Dasein from its world, nor does it isolate it so that it becomes a free-floating 'I' … [it] brings the Self right into its current concernful Being-alongside … and pushes it into solicitous Being with Others. (1962, p. 344; original emphasis)

Therefore, any committed struggle for authenticity involves our attitude towards, and relationships with, others. For Charles Guignon:

> authenticity is a personal undertaking insofar as it entails personal integrity and responsibility for self. But it also has a social dimension insofar as it brings with it a sense of belongingness and indebtedness to the wider social context that makes it possible. (2004, p. 163)

Ethics and compassion

This last reference to our social nature and the possibility of an ethics of authenticity brings us to the question of how DR addresses our relational nature and its views on ethics and moral values. As noted, the position of DR can be seen as an alienated one and it may be partly due to this state that writing on relationships, and hence ethical concerns, is largely absent. This was illustrated by my feelings when I read the acknowledgements section in Ligotti's *The Conspiracy against the Human Race.* After the relentless, overwhelming negativity of the book, I was aware of my surprise at Ligotti's positive acknowledgements, expressing 'appreciation', 'encouragement', 'counsel' and 'responsibility' (2010, p. 6). In fact, one can read a lot of DR and easily forget the place of relationships inherent in our everyday lives. So what happens to the value of relationships in the life and theories of a depressive realist? The place of both existing and potential, positive relationships might offer some challenge to the negativity in DR.

Feltham declares himself a 'depressive realist' (2015, p. 61), although his position also entails what you might call positive elements: his response to DR involves a 'compassionate nihilism' (2015, p. 82). What might this compassion entail? He also talks of a Camus-like revolt against 'social systems that do not work', and 'greed, deception, and illusion', as well as appealing to his readers to 'vigilantly take inventory of your own prejudices, biases and blind spots to the human condition' (2015, p. 205). Perhaps the kind of compassion Feltham refers to here is similar to a notion of

> kindness as a continual temptation in everyday life that we resist. Not a temptation to sacrifice ourselves, but to include ourselves with others. Not a temptation to renounce

> or ignore the aggressive aspects of ourselves, but to see kindness as being in solidarity with human need, and with the very paradoxical sense of powerlessness and power that human need induces. (Philips & Taylor, 2009, p. 117)

Robert Stolorow, one of the best therapists writing on Heidegger, speaks of a 'kinship-in-finitude' (2011, p. 65) and a new form of 'human solidarity' (2011, p. 78). Our being-with-others is also a being-towards-death, and our recognition of the issue of another's authenticity is also an awareness of our shared mortality: 'If we can help one another bear the darkness rather than evade it, perhaps one day we will be able to see the light – as individualized, finite beings, finitely bonded to one another' (2011, p. 78). The question of ethics is one that writers within the world of DR should respond to.

Conclusion

One thing that DR shares with its opposite standpoint – what we could call 'happy realism' (positive psychology?) – is 'certainty' and a difficulty with 'uncertainty'. It seems that committed depressive realists have to keep focused on the negativities just as much as the 'happy realists' need to keep focused on positivity.

Along with this certainty comes another problem for DR: its essentialism. That is, on DR terms, reality is *essentially* depressing, negative, and not mixed or dependent on a particular individual's life. How can one define DR clearly and then commit to it without undermining the negativity due to some positive experiences, attitudes, feelings, etc.? Why these should be any more illusory than their negative counterparts is not clear. We then come back to the existential 'truth' of DR being situated within an individual life – hence DR truths become partial and contingent ones.

Writers within DR imply that anything that suggests that our existence is not essentially and comprehensively depressing is an example of denial in action. If all of human existence, apart from a confirmation of the issues in DR, is a kind of Zapffean defence, how do we rate the meaningfulness or rightness of any sublimation? As depressive realists will also tend to live in denial at times, how is one defence better than another?

While a therapist subscribing to DR makes little sense, a therapist with some serious empathy with DR (and not just seeing it as some kind of irrational 'condition' that needs to be treated) does make sense, and given some of their shared concerns, some existential therapists may be in this position. The view from within humanistic therapy on DR might be interesting, particularly those therapists with a fundamentally positive view of human nature. I would argue that existential philosophy's view of human *being* allows a serious and open exploration of the concerns of DR rather than a simple rejection based on positive prejudices about what it means to be human.

It would be dangerous and naive to simply dismiss DR. In existential terms it may be a seductive pull into a pessimistic 'they', but existential authenticity gives us a committed, albeit anxious way to resist as well as being open to both negative *and* positive possibilities.

In his famous 1945 lecture *Existentialism and Humanism*, given at the end of the Second World War in Paris, Jean-Paul Sartre argued against some of his critics that existentialism was not an 'over-emphasis upon the evil side of human life' and not 'an invitation to people to dwell in quietism of despair', precisely because it 'confronts

man with a possibility of choice' (1973, p. 25). This is a good example of the existential response to DR: even given a depressive realist outlook, how do you want to respond as a being-with-others? What are you to think? How are you going to be? What are you to do with the time you have left?

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

John Pollard has been an integrative counsellor for 20 years and graduated from the Philosophy Department at Essex University in 1993. He wrote the chapter on 'Authenticity and inauthenticity' for *Existential Perspectives on Human Issues: A Handbook for Therapeutic Practice* (Emmy Van Deurzen and Claire Arnold-Baker [Eds.], 2005).

References

Barnett, L., & Madison, G. (2012). *Existential therapy: Legacy, vibrancy and dialogue*. London: Routledge.
Benatar, D. (2006). *Better never to have been: The harm of coming into existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Camus, A. (1986). *The myth of Sisyphus.* (J. O'Brien, Trans.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Cooper, D. (1999). *Existentialism: A reconstruction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Crowell, S. (2012). *The Cambridge companion to existentialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Feltham, C. (2015). *Keeping ourselves in the dark*. Charleston, WV: Nine-Banded Books.
Feltham, C. (2016). Depressive Realism: What it is and why it matters to Humanistic Psychology. *Self & Society: International Journal for Humanistic Psychology*, *44*, 89–94.
Gray, J. (2002). *Straw dogs: Thoughts on humans and other animals.* London: Granta Books.
Gray, J. (2015). *The soul of the marionette: A short inquiry into human freedom*. Harmondsworth: Allen Lane.
Guignon, C. (2004). *On being authentic*. London: Routledge.
Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time.* (J. R. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Heidegger, M. (2010). *Basic writings: Martin Heidegger*. (D. F. Krell, Trans. and Ed.). London: Routledge.
Ligotti, T. (2010). *The conspiracy against the human race*. New York: Hippocampus Press.
Philips, A., & Taylor, B. (2009). *On kindness.* London: Hamish Hamilton.
Sartre, J.-P. (1973). *Existentialism and humanism*. (P. Mairet, Trans.). London: Methuen.
Sartre, J.-P. (2003). *Being and nothingness.* (H. Barnes, Trans.). London: Routledge.
Stolorow, R. (2011). *World, affectivity, trauma*. New York: Routledge.
Yalom, I. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy.* New York: Basic Books.
Zapffe, P. W. (1933/2004). The last messiah. Reprinted in *Philosophy Now*, April 2004. (G. Tangenes, Trans.). Retrieved from https://philosophynow.org/issues/45/The_Last_Messiah.