

Every so often a new version of philosophy comes along and makes a splash – but invariably they are too narrow and too specialized. We need multiple philosophies for multiple levels, and in my opinion one is never enough.

It is also not clear to me what depressive realism has to say about the Transpersonal. If people are spiritual beings, as well as everything else, any theory somehow needs to do justice to this.

Best wishes  
John Rowan

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## A depressive realist response to Caroline Brazier, Ernesto Spinelli and John Rowan

Colin Feltham

I am pleased to respond in turn to these three thoughtful responses, two of which contain some resemblances to, and differences from, depressive realism (DR). Few of us deny that human existence *can* at times be somewhat dark or depressing; such a view can even be romanticized as a Jungian *katabasis* or mystical dark night of the soul. ‘My’ DR view claims to promote the view that life is more often mundanely depressing, or that beneath its banally benign exterior it is always ultimately depressing (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Caroline Brazier stands back from this position, taking the Buddhist view that DR is an illusion borne of a conditioned mind, and the DR as person is ‘fixated on a fictional future death’, among other woes. Ernesto Spinelli speaks of an illusory or deceptive coherence or completeness, a misleading sense of certainty held by the DR. Buddhism and phenomenology have some similarities, of course, as well as differences. And John Rowan sees DR as a ‘one-level approach’ and ironically being as one-sided as positive psychology.

What the four of us have in common, I believe, as well as a therapeutic background, is a sense of enquiry and a common human need to label ourselves: the Buddhist, the phenomenologist, the transpersonalist, and the depressive realist. (I am tempted to invent a joke along the lines of ... ‘went into a bar’.) Each of us strives for and believes we have some degree of purchase on what life means, what its main characteristics and problems are, and what if anything may help, whether it be meditation, psychotherapy or a half-stoical attitude. Psychologists tell us that we commonly suffer from the egoic illusion that our own judgement is superior to that of others. On display in this debate, perhaps we have between us excesses of pessimism, credulousness, intellectuality and esotericism.

It probably comes down to individual differences, or personality. In my own life-long search, I have studied and been immersed in Christian theology (including Tillich's existentialism), the talks and writings of Jiddu Krishnamurti, primal therapy and many other psychotherapy and social science theories. None has endured for me. Currently I am immersed in depressive realism (Feltham, 2016), a label or identity that may or may not endure. I am partly but not necessarily permanently attracted to evolutionary psychology (Feltham, forthcoming). Evidently many people find an intellectual, spiritual or political home, and then remain there contentedly for decades. Few of us are entirely and genuinely nihilistic, but Cioran, Beckett and U. G. Krishnamurti, in their different ways, appeared not to accept or want any label.

U. G. Krishnamurti, in particular, having spent more than half a lifetime consulting with Swami Sivananda, Ramana Maharshi, Jiddu Krishnamurti and other prominent – and putatively enlightened – spiritual leaders to no avail, reportedly had a fortuitous, painful breakthrough at the age of 49, after which his life changed radically. But instead of proclaiming himself enlightened and founding a movement, he went on to fearlessly lambast all spiritual and psychological gurus (Bhatt, 2009). I wish I had such freedom from what others think of me, but I don't. U. G. Krishnamurti, like his namesake Jiddu Krishnamurti, refused to honour or respect any who made claims to spiritual discovery or attainment. Like many, I am impressed when I read about the Buddha, but when I pause to consider it, I realize that I have no way of knowing whether the Buddha was actually enlightened, or indeed if any such state exists at all. (Yes, I know that sounds outcome-fixated instead of open to process.) I know a few people who call themselves Buddhists, who take on exotic names, who meditate, study, and have teachers. Likeable people, but I cannot know if they have any handle on a 'truth' or way of life that others do not. I suspect that a tiny minority have some genuine but idiosyncratic gift for a small degree of transcendence.

I agree with Ernesto that there is no harmony or perfection in human values, and that DR may appear to claim an illusory coherence and completeness. But I do not understand the principle of value pluralism if it implies that all values are equally valid. Consider the values implicit or explicit in, for example, psychoanalysis, scientology, astrology, CBT, Humanistic Psychology, and psychopharmacology, and tell me they are all of equal value and effectiveness. As John says, 'horses for courses' describes the bazaar of choices presented to us.

I use the term 'personality dependent realism' (PDR) to refer to the highly idiosyncratic orientations and choices we all appear to make, based on who knows what mix of genetic, epigenetic, gender, familial, socio-cultural and life course contributions to our epistemological preferences and default positions. DR, as I have described it, clearly seems to embrace pessimistic certainty, but in everyday behaviour I waver and wobble as much as anyone else, sometimes enjoying moments of happiness, and suffering from self-doubt (Feltham, 2016). But I do not find in Yalom (2007), for example, the kind of 'both/and' perspective that Ernesto wants to commend as typical of existential phenomenology. Yalom obviously wants to take down the execrably defensive pessimist Schopenhauer, to show him inferior to warm existential group therapy principles and practice. Similarly, Frankl was pretty certain that meaning was to be found in even the direst of circumstances, with logotherapy on hand to effect enhanced lives. When the chips are down, most of us rush to protect our self-image, reputation and livelihood. Arguably, all such identities are, in terms of terror management theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015), psychological buffers against mortality salience, against threats of meaninglessness and purposelessness.

I do not share John's belief in Wilberian levels of consciousness. In his early theological years, Jiddu Krishnamurti allegedly climbed through various such levels but came to entirely refute that model when his spontaneous 'process' began. I do not believe we are spiritual beings, nor do I believe in any posthumous existence at all: we end, sadly, in ashes or putrescent mush. Death annihilates every one of us. Perhaps I can only be 99.9% certain of that, however, and gerontological research is pushing the limits all the time.

DR does raise the embarrassing question (yet again) of whether psychotherapy really works, or works better than a placebo. It promises much but, similarly to all politics and religion, usually disappoints. Some psychoanalysts claim that analysis is a process of necessary disillusionment. I never needed an expensive analyst to lead me to that position. I suppose I have painted myself into a corner, but no more than we all tend to do at times.

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