Association for Humanistic Psychology in Britain
AHP new vistas MAGAZINE
AHPB Magazine for *Self & Society* | No. 5 - Spring 2020

INTERVIEW

Existentialism-humanism, US Style

Kirk Schneider with Richard House

Eminent North American authority on existential-humanistic therapy and psychology, **Kirk Schneider,** is interviewed by Richard House

Richard House [**RH**]: Kirk, it's a great honour to be interviewing you for *Self and Society*'s online magazine – not least because it's a tremendous opportunity for our UK members and readers to gain insight into the Humanistic Psychology movement in North America from someone as senior in the movement as yourself. I wonder whether we could hit the ground running by touching on a question that came up in my interview with Ernesto Spinelli in a previous AHPb magazine (no. 2, winter 2018/19 – Spinelli and House, 2018–19). I know you identify as both 'existential' and 'humanistic', and I'm also aware that while they are often bracketed together, there's also some degree of (hopefully creative?) tension between the two 'approaches' (if I can use that term). Can you tell us how you see existentialism and humanism sitting together and cohering into a single 'approach' – perhaps including something of your own personal and professional journey into this field of psychology – e.g. what drew you to the field, and whether existentialism or humanism takes precedence for you.

Kirk Schneider [KS]: Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this extraordinarily rich and timely question, Richard. I also just read the interview you did with Ernesto and found it fascinating – feeling myself in kinship with much that both you and Ernesto express. That notion of the 'edge being the center' that Ernesto quoted reminds me of my own conception of self as a 'fluid center'. This is a 'self' that optimally perhaps neither forecloses boundaries nor breaks up completely into non-entity and nihilism. The question, however, is where we are on that spectrum. This is not an easy question because as I've followed Ernesto's existential-phenomenological stance (and I must admit that I'm by no means an expert on that stance – although I do have a fair philosophical background in the area), I see places where we decidedly converge and where we begin to drift apart. That said, there are no hard and fast distinctions here as I see it, which is part of that wonderful 'creative festival' of Gadamer to which you both allude in that previous interview.

All of this is to set the stage, then, for the evocative question you pose at the start of this interview, 'how I see existentialism and humanism sitting together?'. Let me say first that American (that is, US) Humanistic Psychology has emphatically shifted in recent years (see especially the introduction to *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology*; Schneider et al., 2015). It is now much less self-centric and opening very much to the relational, the multicultural, the ontological and the spiritual. So it is not so far at all from Ernesto's interrelatedness perspective (which in some ways I think makes his otherwise splendid debate with John Rowan in *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology* a bit of a 'straw man', because humanism and existentialism are no longer quite as 'either/or' as that encounter implied).

In fact, one of our chief definitions for Humanistic Psychology these days ends with question marks – 'What does it mean to be fully, experientially human? And how does that understanding inform the vital or fulfilled life?' This definition recognises the fluid and evolving nature of the self, but also anchors that recognition with an exploration of its moral implication, i.e. 'How does that understanding inform the vital or fulfilled life?'. In my view, this – renewed and broad – definition of Humanistic Psychology embraces much of Ernesto's interrelatedness thesis, but without losing a sense of the deeply personal or intimate that is characteristic of the humanistic tradition. This is not to say that the personal and intimate reveal some ultimate truth or essence, but that they reflect an embodied, phenomenological resonance that many people share. Put another way, this evolving humanistic view is postmodern (or post-structural) but with an 'orienting core', or it yields a discovery of 'ground' within the 'groundlessness' of existence; which I believe is quite compatible with your and Ernesto's perspective in the interview. The issue, however, is to what degree? To what degree are we compatibly situated along this humanist–existential spectrum, and what are the practical consequences of our respective positions?

Let me try another angle here. If we combine 'Humanistic Psychology' which emphasises the 'flesh and blood' *experience* of our relationship to being (the cosmos, existence etc.), and 'existential psychology' which stresses our participation in the *matrix* of being (the cosmos, existence), then we form a *vital and dynamic tension* that many here in the United States call 'existential-humanistic psychology'. Hence, many of us here view the polarities of that dialectic as integral to illuminating the fuller experience of being human, and see problems when either of the polarities becomes over-emphasised.

Some examples of these problems are, to be sure, the hyper-individualist, bounded-self view that traditional humanistic psychologists once took as primary. This view indeed too often led to a myopic reinforcement of the white Western status quo of selfishness, materialism, chauvinism. But you also, on the other hand, have traditional existential thinkers who appeared to over-identify with an abstract conception of 'being' (and the metaphysical) without concretely anchoring that conception in the intimate person-to-person meetings of (human) beings. Perhaps one of the classical examples of the latter is Heidegger's conception of Being as distinct from Levinas's emphasis on the face-to-face encounters *within* being. In some senses you could conceive of Heidegger's view as more purely existential (entailing essentially our relationship to being), and Levinas's as more humanistic (entailing essentially the flesh and blood experiences within being). You put these two together and you capture well the spirit and letter of contemporary existential-humanistic psychology.

Now I realise that my examples are overly simplistic in certain respects, but perhaps they make the point that existential-humanistic psychology views itself as having moved to a fruitful middle ground with regard to the traditional emphases of Existential and Humanistic Psychology, and is thereby attempting to broaden the investigative ground.

How does this show up clinically? It means that existential-humanistic therapists attempt to stay open to not only what is evidently 'there' in the meeting between people, but also to what may be intuited yet unregarded within people. And while sometimes this risk-taking to call attention to

what seems to be emerging rather than strictly what is apparent in the therapy relationship can be impositional and chauvinistic, it can also be 'dead on', and help to open experiential vistas that would not otherwise have been revealed, or would have been revealed much later in the course of the work.

Hence, this is where highly attuned and discerning invitations for the client to consider preverbal-kinesthetic expressions (such as a lowering of the head, or moistness in the eye etc.) can be so powerful, at least for many of us who have witnessed such openings. (For an example of this approach, see the American Psychological Association video series 'Existential-Humanistic Therapy Over Time'.) And while this 'existential-humanistic' orientation can certainly be challenged as too potentially presumptuous (e.g. ahead of, or even detached from, what the person is 'actually' experiencing), it can also yield profound benefits that more 'being'-oriented therapists may miss. But again, I do not make light of this perspective: it must be very skilfully and discerningly engaged, lest mismatches – or even ruptures – derail the relational bond.

I could say more about this delicate work, as well as one of its recent offshoots termed 'existential-integrative therapy'; however, suffice it to say that existential-humanistic approaches are increasingly recognising the value of a variety of ways to 'meet people where they live', but without, to the extent possible, sacrificing the experiential core of that life, which is everywhere threatened by reductionism. (Here, the recent *Wiley World Handbook of Existential Therapy* may be of interest – van Deurzen et al., 2019.) So there you have it, my – densely leavened – perspective on existential-humanistic psychology, and where it sits in regard to some of the points you, Ernesto and others in the existential psychology community have put forth. I hope this reflection helps to move our conversation forward, as well as the conundrums!

RH: Phew! – I certainly think that's an example of 'hitting the ground running', Kirk! I find the terminological clarifications and discerning sharpenings you've provided here immensely helpful – and they also suggest to me that perhaps at least some folks in the States may have thought more deeply about these issues than most of we Brits.

There's so much here to pick up on… – let me try to hone in quickly on key thoughts and questions that come to mind from your fascinating discussion. First, at the risk of lobbing in a disruptive wild-card, I'm wondering whether there's a place for *psychodynamic/psychoanalytic* perspectives in your articulation of 'existential-humanistic therapy'? I remember being very excited when, many years ago, I came across the work of Medard Boss (e.g. 1994), Dasein-analysis and Heidegger's famous Zollikon Seminars (2000) – suggesting that existentialism and psychoanalysis might not be nearly as incompatible bedfellows as writers like Sartre have wanted to claim. I'm also aware of great writers like Donald Winnicott and Peter Lomas, who show in their rich writings that the demarcation lines between psychoanalysis, existentialism and humanism aren't nearly as clear-cut and mutually excluding as more schoolist-minded theorists might want to claim.

KS: I agree with much that you say above, and certainly see the newer, especially intersubjective forms of psychoanalysis *à la* Stolorow as quite compatible with the existential-humanistic position in any case. They are phenomenologically oriented and they emphasise the here-now encounter with the therapist. The main place where I see a difference between the respective approaches is in the emphasis on experiential, that is, embodied, preverbal, searching processes. I think the existential-humanistic approach still emphasises a greater attention to such processes, even when traditionally psychodynamic issues, such as childhood traumata, are at the forefront. It's a comparatively greater emphasis on process as distinct from content and interpretation.

RH: Yes, thanks for reminding (and re-bodying!) me about the embodied experientialism of the existential-humanistic approach, Kirk: it's a crucial difference – and one reason why I opted to train as a body-psychotherapist all those years ago (early 1990s). Finding common ground and cross-overs with other modalities is great and exciting – but it's

vital not to collapse them and then miss or overlook the vital differences, too.

What prompted my previous question, I think, was your interesting statement that 'existential-humanistic therapists attempt to stay open to not only what is evidently "there" in the meeting between people, but also *to what may be intuited yet unregarded <u>within</u> people*' (my italics – and I note that you use 'within' rather than *between* people in this statement). And then my line of thinking was reinforced when, a bit further down, you mention 'existential-*integrative* therapy'! I do wonder whether the most effective therapists tend to be those who possess a genuinely open, Winnicottian capacity for flexibility and accurate-enough attunement from moment-to-moment in the emerging work (and that such abilities can't be 'trained-in' in any proceduralist or skills-centred way).

KS: Yes, I agree, Richard; and I should have added 'between' along with 'within'; I certainly do in my thinking about 'presence' as a holding and illuminating of that which is salient within the client and between client and therapist – and correspondingly for the unregarded. The unregarded can be that which arises between *as well as* within. The 'unregarded' part, moreover, is also important, as it forms a bridge between the psychoanalytic and existential. It's just that the existential tends to see the unregarded (or unreflected-upon experience) in a comparatively broader and possibly deeper (?) light than strictly the mapping on of childhood conflicts in the present relationship. It *is* often a mapping on, but not necessarily reducible to interpersonal conflicts: the stakes are higher in many cases, as they relate to the implications of such interpersonal conflicts for clashes with the groundlessness of existence – one's core existential dilemma, not only the dynamics of abusive parenting for example. And this is precisely why, in my view, people's deepest struggles can't be articulated (or interpreted) very well, because they are beyond categories as such, and need to be described more through metaphors (e.g. 'free-fall'), body sensations, and images.

Finally, I'm with you about effective therapists, although I do think some of that flexibility can be greatly sharpened through concerted experiential practice, as we emphasise at the Existential-Humanistic Institute – and many other existentially oriented training programmes.

RH: I love this! – '…people's deepest struggles can't be articulated (or interpreted) very well, because they are beyond categories as such, and need to be described more through metaphors'. Hear hear! – and we could easily start speaking here about holism in relation to Iain McGilchrist's work here on the brain and consciousness evolution, and how the tyranny of the 'left-brain' is impacting humankind at so many levels. But we can leave this issue to Grethe Hooper Hansen's article elsewhere in this issue of the magazine.

I really like that you added earlier that 'this "existential-humanistic" orientation can certainly be challenged as too potentially presumptuous (e.g. ahead of, or even detached from, what the person is "actually" experiencing)… it must be very skilfully and discerningly engaged'. Indeed – and there's perhaps some tension here with more 'purist' person-centred and phenomenological approaches, which would typically claim to be confining themselves to merely *describing* as accurately as possible what's present, and not venturing into speculation or the making of intuitive hunches.

I'm very much of the view that it's inappropriate – not to mention impossible! – to *generalise* in therapy work – i.e. to adopt a diagnosis-centred approach whereby you first make a diagnosis of the client's/patient's 'condition', and then draw upon pre-known research on those 'conditions' to inform, and even determine, the kinds of therapeutic interventions you make. Such a 'scientific' approach seems to me to assume that the unfathomable complexity of a human being can be well-enough captured by and summarised in a diagnostic label; yet all of my own clinical experience (along with my humanistic commitments) strongly suggest that people are unique and inherently and tantalisingly unpredictable (something I rejoice in!) – and so to engage in 'proceduralist' therapy (if I can coin that term) is to do a potential or actual violence to human uniqueness. Would such a view be compatible with 'existential-humanistic therapy' as you conceive it?

KS: It certainly is compatible as I see it, Richard. But I'd like to add that I nevertheless *do* see patterns with distressed people. These are general tendencies that we all share to one degree or other, like being fear-driven vs (comparatively) choice-driven. And like being polarised on the basis of those fears. I define 'polarisation', or what I call 'the polarised mind', as the fixation on a single point of view to the utter exclusion of competing points of view. And the chief problem with our psychiatric nomenclature is that it fails to recognise these tendencies in cultures, power brokers, businesses, professions, families, and entire systems under which we operate, and so we end up stigmatising individuals. We peg individuals as having this or that obsession, or this or that mania, but at so many levels it's the cultures and subcultures out of which these individuals emerge that have these problems, and those cultures and subcultures are many times more menacing. This is where I think folks like R.D. Laing and Eric Fromm were so very prescient.

We shouldn't use labels to reduce individuals to a given 'sickness', but attempt to understand how we are *all* implicated in the sickness, as well as the complexity and richness that extends far beyond it. So this is our main task as existential-humanists as I see it – to starkly face the partialisations and fetishisations of our present human lot, and to find ways to connect ourselves with the larger possibilities of that lot, and the larger capacities to respond to rather than simply react against the anxieties of those possibilities.

RH: This is such a rich and thought-generating dialogue, Kirk – thank you! Your comment about (generalisable) patterns got me thinking about the generalisation/uniqueness polarity (if I can call it that). I guess for me it's about getting beyond the desire/wish/need to make it one *or* the other. That is, it's about recognising that our words, concepts and theories are always (in some sense) *maps* of reality but never the reality itself. (By the way, I'm not a trained/professional academic philosopher, so if I'm getting into philosophically deep water here, so be it! – but I think Kant had something to say about all this?)

Reflecting on it, I think I tend to take up a polarising allegiance to privileging *uniqueness* as a counterweight to the prevailing scientific orthodoxy (*story*) that favours making generalisations. I see the damage that that mentality does everywhere, and that leaves me wanting to counter it! But perhaps it could be just as limiting (or even damaging) to rigidly hold to the view that 'uniqueness rules', and so then missing the ways in which there *do* exist universal, commonly held experiences – albeit, perhaps, never necessarily *experienced* in the same way by each 'unique' individual (I think perhaps this is where the 'scientific generalisation' approach can cause the most violence to persons/clients/patients who are subjected to it).

So I'm wondering whether the existential-humanistic approach could take an explicit position-*which-is-not-one* on all this? – for example, that the issue isn't one of privileging either generalisation or uniqueness, but finding a way of being in relation with the other that allows what comes to and through us to emerge, without distorting it with pre-deciding one way or another. Lots of links with phenomenology and 'wonder' here, perhaps? I recently came across a quotation from the great educationalist Max Van Manen, which I think speaks to this – 'Phenomenological research begins with wonder at what gives itself and how something gives itself. It can only be pursued while surrendering to a state of wonder' (Van Manen, 2014, p. 27) – and the notion of 'surrender' is really crucial here too, I think.

I find myself lapsing into postmodern motifs here! In your last answer, what you said about polarisation got me thinking about postmodern 'approaches' also (though even as I write it I realise the idea of a 'postmodern' *approach* is something of a self-contradicting absurdity). But in the spirit of postmodern epistemology dismantling binaries, and problematising the very foundations of Western metaphysics, I'm wondering whether you see any fruitful encounter between existentialism-humanism and at least some elements of a postmodern ethos, Kirk?

KS: Re wonder – indeed, Richard; Merleau-Ponty begins his classic *Phenomenology of Perception* with the state of wonder.

For sure, I'd say existential-humanism and postmodernism are linked in a very similar way that phenomenology and postmodernism are linked; they both rest on the arbitration of human experience rather than some outside Truth or Absolute. That said, however, I would also add that existential-humanism (I won't speak for phenomenology here) gives a great deal of weight to human experience that is *experienced* as weighty, unlike some versions of postmodernist philosophy which summarily dismiss such terms as 'weight' and 'depth' and 'profundity' because of their cultural relativity. But they are perhaps the 'best' illusions we have, as Ernest Becker and before him Kierkegaard suggest, and the question of their validity is up to the market-place of ideas, and beyond ideas, to 'whole body experiences', or what I have called elsewhere 'resonance validity'. That doesn't mean they have any metaphysical truth with a capital 'T', but it also doesn't mean that they are to be treated as casually as we might a piece of clothing.

To put this another way, I share postmodernity's scepticism about essences and absolutes (or 'privileged positions' on reality); but I also shirk at postmodernity's reluctance to acknowledge the power, and *possible* metaphysical connections to what I just called 'resonance validity'. In this light, I sometimes think that strident postmodernists are a bit cavalier toward what many would call deeply held values, because they tend to be approaching those values with their heads (or cerebrums) more than their whole body experience. When experiences of life are approached with one's whole body experience, again, it is hard not to see something of the poignant, awe-based, or even sacral in them, and this is where existential-humanism brings a 'heart' to post-structural pragmatism, and even to the 'absurdity' of life.

Is this not what some of our best existential-humanist artists suggest as well? I think of Kazantzakas and Camus in literature, von Trier and Bergman in film, and Angelou and Dylan in poetry etc.

RH: I'm delighted that you don't reject postmodernism out of hand, Kirk, as so many do – and that you're radically open to apprehending what of value it does have to bring. What it's helped me to do is to realise that *everything* we ever think entails assumptions and metaphysical presuppositions that commonly limit and constrain – and at worst *determine* – what we're able to think, and therefore experience. I know some radically challenge what they see as postmodernism's assault on the very possibility of truth (e.g. Blackburn, 2018); but I rather see it as a tremendous (humanistic) *liberation*, to at least have the capacity and openness to becoming aware of the ways in which we (nearly always unawarely) limit and constrain what we can experience and think, and create 'regimes of truth' (Foucault) that we're not even aware are regimes!

The late great Paul Feyeraband is also one of my great heroes in this regard, and his 1975 classic *Against Method* was such a wonderful elixir for me to challenge the mindless positivism that universities were swamped in when I did my degrees in the 1970s (see also House, 2010).

But we could go on for ever, Kirk! – and I'd love to (there's an existential joke there somewhere, I'm sure!...). I want to end this great interview with two questions, for you to make of as you wish. First, I know that you've been in the throes of finishing your new book on *The Depolarizing of America: A Guidebook for Social Healing*. As I understand it, this work draws on your experiences with the 'experiential democracy dialogue' and Better Angels – or living-room dialogues between liberals and conservatives. I know this will be of great interest to our readers – as it is to me! Can you say more about the work that underpins the book – and summarise its main findings?

And of course I have to end with a C-virus question! Having watched your fascinating podcast (Schneider, 2020), could you tell us how you conceive of a distinctively existential-humanistic perspective on the virus and the pandemic. Does y/our approach have distinctively interesting insights into this phenomenon and these extra-extraordinary times in which it's unfolding? (I thought I'd lob you a really easy question to end with!).

KS: The *Depolarizing of America* is an attempt to 'give away' the tools and sensibilities that I have learned from both founding and participating in dialogue groups that have addressed the polarised

mind. Specifically, it elaborates my reflections on how the awe-based spirit of democracy stemming from the best of America's founding vision, which, along with my background in existential-depth psychology, have led to the development of the 'Experiential Democracy Dialogue', a one-on-one approach to social conflict mediation, as well as the grass-roots organisation called 'Braver Angels' (formerly 'Better Angels'), which now has some 10,000 members in all 50 states in the USA.

In *The Depolarizing of America*, I have synthesised several versions of these approaches that are designed for use by 'everyday people' – family, friends, neighbours, as well as community activists, students and teachers, and even legislators, to help us unshackle ourselves from the knot of divisiveness and hate. I recognise that the book is a rather Sisyphian effort, but I have been deeply moved by these dialogue movements and witnessed their surprising effectiveness first hand. Moreover, their foundations not only resonate with deeply held tenets of the democratic spirit but with the principles of phenomenology and existentialism in concrete, everyday applications.

And regarding your 'lobbed-in' C-virus question! What I can say is that this is certainly a grim time – an existentially challenging time, if there ever was one. It is also a time when we rightly turn to our medical caregivers for life-changing interventions and support. We look to our political leaders, at least the ones we can trust, to turn the gears of government in a healing direction. But far too often we forget to turn to artistic and philosophical sources that provide existential sustenance at a time when psycho-spiritual 'remedies' are spare, and the sense of helplessness abounds.

I'm speaking of 'specialists' in the art of 'response-ability' in the face of grave perils, such as Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*, Albert Camus in *The Plague*, and Rollo May in *Freedom and Destiny*. In the Youtube interview you've referred to with UK broadcast journalist Isabella Clarke, we have an intimate discussion about the latter purviews, as well as the role of existential-humanistic and existential-integrative approaches to our trying times.

RH: Kirk, what this great interview has helped me realise is that there's far too little contact between our respective US and UK Associations for Humanistic Psychology! – both of which have been going now for around half a century. I know our readers will be delighted to hear from one of North America's foremost humanistic/existential voices – thank you, and for the great work you're doing.

KS: Thank you, Richard, and I whole-heartedly agree about the lack of dialogue between our respective worlds. My hope is that this discussion takes a modest step toward addressing this gap, and hence the gaps in existential inquiry.

References

Blackburn, S. (2018). *On Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Boss, M. (1994). *Existential Foundations of Medicine and Psychology*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson (orig. 1979).

Feyerabend, P.K. (1975) *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*. London: New Left Books.

Heidegger, M. (2000). *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols – Conversations – Letters*, ed. M. Boss. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

House, R. (2010). 'Psy' research beyond late-modernity: towards praxis-congruent research. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 8 (1): 13–20.

Schneider, K.J. (2013). *The Polarized Mind: Why It's Killing Us and What We Can Do about It.* Colorado Springs, Colo.:University Professors Press.

Schneider, K.J. (2019). *The Spirituality of Awe: Challenges to the Robotic Revolution* (revised edn). Colorado Springs, Colo.: University Professors Press.

Schneider, K.J. (2020). #688 Video: Existential-Humanistic Psychologist Dr. Kirk Schneider reflects on the pandemic (51 minutes). Available at https://tinyurl.com/saaok9p (accessed 1 April 2020).

Schneider, K.J. (in press). *The Depolarizing of America: A Guidebook to Social Healing*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: University Professors Press.

Schneider, K.J., Pierson, J.F., & Bugental, J.F.T (Eds) (2015). Introduction. In their *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology: Theory, Research, and*

Practice (pp. xvi–xxiv). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

Spinelli, E. & House, R. (2018–19). The AHP Magazine Interview – I: Existential therapy meets the humanistic therapies. *Association for Humanistic Psychology Magazine for Self & Society*, 2 (Winter); available at https://tinyurl.com/uv2772f (accessed 1 April 2020).

van Deurzen, E., Craig, E., Laengle, A., Schneider, K.J, Tantam, D., & du Plock, S. (eds) (2019). *The Wiley World Handbook of Existential Therapy*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of Practice.* Walnut Creek, Calif.: Left Coast Press.

About the contributors

Kirk Schneider is a leading spokesperson for contemporary existential-humanistic psychology. Dr Schneider is the current president of the Existential-Humanistic Institute (EHI), Council Member of the American Psychological Association (APA), past president (2015–2016) of the Society for Humanistic Psychology (Division 32) of the APA, recent past editor of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (2005–2012), and adjunct faculty member at Saybrook University and Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr Schneider is also an Honorary Member of the Society for Existential Analysis and of the East European Association for Existential Therapy. A Fellow of five Divisions of the APA, Dr Schneider has published over 200 articles, interviews and chapters, and has authored or edited 13 books, including *The Spirituality of Awe, The Polarized Mind, Awakening to Awe, The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology, Existential-Humanistic Therapy* and (forthcoming) *The Depolarizing of America.* For more information visit https://kirkjschneider.com

Richard House is a former therapist and former university lecturer in psychology, psychotherapy and education, who now works as a full-time left-green activist in Stroud, Gloucestershire. He still enjoys editing *Self & Society* journal as it approaches its 50th year. His latest book, *Pushing Back to Ofsted*, was published last month (InterActions, April 2020).

A Response to Kirk Schneider

By Manu Bazzano

Schneider's wish is that his fascinating notion of a 'fluid self' proposed from the outset will keep the self, among other things, from 'break[ing] up entirely into non-entity and nihilism'. But the self is precisely a non-entity: a nominal, occasionally useful construct which often hinders experiencing. The starting hypothesis of any 'existentialism' is that we all are, despite our heroic or academic exertions, *non-entities*. A post-existential addendum is that all attempts at integration are futile because the self, like time itself, is out of joint.

And what is 'nihilism'? The view that life in and by itself is nothing (*nihil*) or next to nothing, without some form of elevation, explanation or redemption – without the attribution of essence and 'entity' to its unfathomable, groundless flux.

'Psychologically' speaking, this means affixing the signature of a self to the stream of experience, *aka* 'painting eyeballs on chaos' (Matthiessen, 1980, p. 243). The hope is that through the ingenious hypothesis of a *self* – a neurotic formation birthed in culpability – the magnificence and terror of the world may be magically endured and its arbitrariness justified. The existential answer is: fat chance. The accompanying delusion is that without an atomistic self there can be no agency, when in fact the opposite is true: agency emerges whenever experiencing is uncluttered by self-driven agendas.

I don't know whether terror of the inherent insubstantiality of the self is a characteristic feature of US style existentialism/humanism, but I am baffled to often hear existential therapists refer to the 'European' existentialism of Camus and Sartre as 'nihilist'. Strictly speaking, one could apply the same label to the Buddha, for his fundamental teaching is *anattā*, or no-self. The 'spiritual' pitfall here is to then elevate this newly found entity, 'no-self', but that belongs to another conversation....

Schneider hits the existential nail on the head when referring to the over-identification in existential

circles 'with an abstract conception of "being"' at the expense of concrete beings. He then inexplicably neuters in the same breath his own perceptive critique by speaking into existence a thoroughly intractable reconciliation between Heidegger and Levinas. I read this as Schneider's generous attempt to establish bridges between disparate perspectives. In doing so, however, he misconstrues both thinkers: there is nothing existential, let alone 'purely' existential, about Heidegger's insistence on our relation with the Arcadian phantom he calls 'Being'. Schneider sees Levinas as a humanist but I cannot think of a more *non-humanist* thinker. Humanistic thinking is as far as one can imagine from Levinas' rigorous stance, for he is a thinker of separation, violence and otherness. Too cosy a notion of the 'human' is, incidentally, a hindrance to what the psychotherapeutic enterprise is in my view about: *transformation* (Bazzano, 2018), which is in essence transhuman. Transformation is to the human what the butterfly is to the caterpillar.

Schneider's attempt exemplifies an interesting failing at the heart of much existential/humanist thought: a commendable intent at dialogue whose inclusiveness morphs into consensus; a well-meaning desire to please everyone, breeding a philosophy and praxis that does not *disturb* anyone and is, arguably, of little use to any project of *emancipation*.

Gadamer's cultural festival echoed by Schneider echoing Spinelli is a case in point. This ecstasy of consensus at the heart of current existential/humanistic psychology is an echo chamber, a gala event in a hall full of mirrors where the self is only temporarily interrupted by otherness. For Gadamer, the contextual *totality* (Heidegger's 'being') remains unscathed.

This is closely linked to the uncritical enthusiasm with which humanistic/existential therapy has embraced psychoanalytic intersubjectivity, an 'approach' that bypasses one fundamental aspect: relatedness is not a given but an accident, a rare achievement.

References

Bazzano, M. (2018). Against humanism: on therapy and the overhuman. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 16 (3): e1468; see https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/ppi.1468.

Matthiessen, P. (1980). *The Snow Leopard*. London: Picador.

Manu Bazzano is a writer, therapist and supervisor with a background in philosophy, Zen and rock music. He is an internationally recognised facilitator and visiting tutor at various institutions, including Cambridge University. His latest book is *Nietzsche and Psychotherapy*. He edited the forthcoming *Re-Visioning Existential Therapy*, a collection of essays by existential therapists around the globe. See Manu's interview elsewhere in this issue of the magazine.