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THE FRAMEWORK OF EXISTENTIAL THERAPY

Change alone is eternal, perpetual, immortal

Schopenhauer

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Introducing existential therapy

The questions that existential philosophers address are the questions that human beings have always asked themselves but for which they have never found satisfactory answers. This makes them both familiar and problematic. They are questions like:

- What does it mean to be alive?
- Why is there something rather than nothing?
- How should I act and be in relation to other people?
- How can I live a worthwhile life?
- What will happen after I die?

These are also the questions which clients are preoccupied with.

In spite of this familiarity there are some good reasons why existential ideas are not well known in psychotherapy. First, existential therapy does not have a single founding author with which it can be identified; it has no Freud, Rogers, Perls or Pavlov.

Second it has its roots in philosophy, which in spite of its intimate connections to the questions of living and its long history, has always been a rather academic discipline. All therapeutic perspectives have a philosophical basis but this is rarely acknowledged.

Because of their practical training, most therapists and counsellors are not used to exploring questions in a philosophical manner. They often focus on psychological and behavioural symptoms or on concrete aspects of professional interaction.

Although all existential thinkers have the philosophical stance in common, they can hold quite differing views and it is this dynamism and diversity that give the existential approach its particular strength and resilience. Nevertheless, it is the family resemblances that allow us to identify the characteristic skills and interventions of existential counselling and therapy that we will describe in these pages. We will be concentrating on how to explore our clients' human questions philosophically.

As we said in the Introduction, trying to delineate 'existential skills' is problematic because systematization and technique have generally been avoided in favour of personal freedom and responsibility. Existential therapists are reluctant to say: 'This is how you do existential therapy' because one of the central principles of existential therapy is that each therapist has to create his or her own personal way of working. But it is most definitely not a free-for-all. Existential therapy is an enquiry into meaning and any enquiry that is not systematic will lead to haphazard results and will be influenced by what the researcher wishes to find. Therefore it has characteristic structures, actions, disciplined interventions and specific skills to guide this enquiry and the task of existential therapists is to make these their own. They are based on the same broad structures that underpin phenomenological research. Indeed, existential philosophy is the result of the application of the phenomenological research method to the study of existence.

Before we go any further, a word of caution is necessary about some specialist words. Many everyday words like 'choice' and 'anxiety' are used in the existential tradition in a special sense, and this needs to be borne in mind. Conversely, there are many unfamiliar words like 'being-in-the-world' or 'thrownness' that sound daunting, but which actually refer to familiar experiences. These too will be explained.

What do we mean by 'philosophical'?

So what does it mean when we describe the existential approach to psychotherapy as philosophical? A wide range of philosophical writing is available to therapists, but not all philosophy is relevant, since it does not all deal with human or moral issues. Much of early Greek philosophy, Eastern philosophy and nineteenth- and twentieth-century Continental philosophy is relevant. Most of analytical philosophy is not so pertinent to therapy. Counsellors and therapists wishing to work in an existential manner do not necessarily need to have a thorough grounding in this literature and philosophical heritage. But they do have to develop some philosophical method in their thinking about life.

Other therapeutic approaches are primarily biological, psychological, social, intellectual or spiritual in nature and generally neglect philosophy. They also concentrate on what goes on inside an individual or between people and rarely extend to considering the human condition and its wider philosophical and socio-political context. Most therapies also focus on what is wrong and describe this as pathology and state that their objective is to cure a person of this. They are mostly concerned with intrapsychic or inter-personal factors. While existential therapy may also accommodate these dimensions at different times, its field of vision is wider and reaches beyond

individual problems to life itself. Its focus is on the nature of truth and reality rather than on personality, illness or cure, so rather than thinking about function and dysfunction, it prefers to think in terms of a person's ability to meet the challenges that life inevitably presents us with.

Although the existential approach clearly involves ideas, it is not simply intellectual like a crossword puzzle and is certainly not abstract like mathematics. Understanding life is as crucial to survival as the ability to talk, walk, breathe or eat. It is practical and concrete. It is always life that is the teacher, and ideas are no use unless they can make a positive difference to our lives.

Action based on experience is everyone's first language. In this sense, existential therapy is the practical application of philosophy to everyday living. It is about coming to understand and therefore live productively and creatively within the constraints and possibilities of life. To engage with existential ideas requires us to have the courage to value diversity over uniformity, concreteness over abstractness, open-ended dilemmas over simplistic answers, and personally discovered and hard-earned authority over pre-existing dogmas and established power.

Fundamentally the skills of the existential therapist begin with the phrase inscribed at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, 'Know thyself' because we cannot understand anyone or anything until we first understand ourselves and our relationship to human existence. This means that our primary tool as therapists is ourselves and our understanding of life, not theory or technique.

But even this is not so simple since we are always changing and we are also permanently and fundamentally in relationship with others. What this means is that one can never ignore the needs of others when making personal decisions but neither can one allow others to entirely determine oneself even when alone. This is a paradox.

What do we mean by 'existential'?

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger and the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre both agreed that existence comes before essence. What this means is that the fact *that* we are is more basic than *what* we are. *We are* first and define ourselves later. Moreover, we are always in a process of becoming something else. A person is first and foremost dynamic, alive, self-reflective and changing and this is the most important characteristic: *that* we exist, *that* we are alive and *that* we can transform ourselves, be aware and learn. For example, the essence of this book is that it is about the skills involved in existential therapy. But this book will always be this book; it will never change and also will not be able to change itself. A person is different at different times. We are dynamic, responsive and interactive. In one sense a person's essence is their chemical composition, e.g. as 85 per cent water. In another sense, a person is their genetic constitution, made up of half of each parent's gene pool. In yet another sense we can be said to be the result of our early experiences and education. Or we can say we are defined by the bio-chemical processes in our brains. Existentially, a person is clearly far more than any and all of this.

Let's consider the following incomplete sentence:

Fundamentally people are ...

If we were to say that essence is more fundamental than existence, it could be completed in many different ways depending on one's view of human nature, for example:

Fundamentally, people are their DNA, or

Fundamentally, people are out for themselves, or

Fundamentally, people are social beings, or

Fundamentally, people are made in the likeness of a god.

The fact that we can talk about the human essence in so many different ways explains why there are so many different theories of psychotherapy, because they all consider essence to be prior to existence and they all have different views of what constitutes this essence.

But if it is true that existence precedes essence, the above sentence can only be completed with a full stop:

Fundamentally, people are.

That we exist and how we exist determine the essence that emerges, not the other way round. This is the first principle that all existential philosophers share: that their primary concern is the existence of human beings. It is also the most significant defining characteristic of existential therapy. A therapeutic approach can be described as existential if it accepts this premise.

This is of course not the end of the matter by any means. If people are primarily without a fixed essence, then their life becomes a matter of personal interpretation, responsibility and choice. What we take as being our essence, our nature, our sense of self, in fact evolve over time and are a consequence of the way we interpret the fundamental givens, the boundaries, of existence. We only see it as fixed because it evokes too much anxiety, existential anxiety, to acknowledge its innate flexibility and fluidity.

It is the capacity for thinking and reflecting on the constraints of our existence that creates a sense of self and it is this reflection that plays the major role in what we are. It is our understanding that allows us to choose whether we let ourselves be defined by circumstance or find a way to meet life's challenges.

EXERCISE

Make a list of six different identities, characteristics or talents you think you have. For example:

- parent
- gardener
- bi-lingual
- son/daughter
- therapist
- student

Now go through them one by one and imagine how your life would be without that characteristic. Don't move on to the next one until you've dealt completely with the previous one. The chances are that it will be difficult, though not impossible, to imagine, but that it will also evoke some strong feelings. We get very attached to these identities; in fact, we often imagine that they are all that we are. We are, however, more (or perhaps more aptly less) than this, and even without these characteristics we still are. We still exist. You may find that at the end of the exercise you have a sudden sense of the being that remains when all your special identities have been temporarily suspended!

This unique ability of human beings to reflect on existence and on ourselves makes us different from other animals and objects, but it comes at a price: that of personal responsibility.

The philosophical aims of existential therapy

Human issues were always the focus of Greek philosophy and the Greek myths are basically stories that explain how these issues can be understood and dealt with, rather like biblical stories also do. Greek philosophy (the word meaning 'love of wisdom') explored such issues more rationally and more effectively. It was indeed a search for wisdom about human existence that would lead us beyond mythology. Ultimately, existential therapy is a contemporary form of practical and applied philosophy that seeks to assist people in acquiring the wisdom to understand and live their lives with greater awareness and understanding. Therapy helps people do so through a process of judicious questioning and sifting through feelings, experiences and intuitions in order to come to clarity of reflection and insight.

The task of being human is not primarily psychological or biological but philosophical and the task of the existential therapist is to make this philosophical questioning practical and relevant to an individual's quest for a better life. The aim for the therapist is to work with the client in their search for truth with an open mind and an attitude of wonder, rather than fitting the client overtly or covertly into established frameworks of interpretation. It means that we have to be prepared to examine our assumptions about life.

The existential approach to therapy is about learning to philosophize in the sense of asking important questions about what it means to be alive. It places a responsibility on both the therapist and client to lucidly apply the ideas and to understand our position in the world and to evaluate the consequences in the light of truth and reality. When we do this wholeheartedly it becomes an enjoyable way of living life. Rather than seeking to minimize our difficulties, we learn to appreciate them as moments where we gain insight.

EXERCISE

Think of a time when you were mistaken about your evaluation of someone: let yourself think back to how this mistaken judgement came about, without judging yourself. Just observe the process of your own assumptions and prejudice.

- How do you jump to conclusions about other people?
- How do you decide whether something is right or true?
- What principles do you use to guide your decisions? Where do they come from?

It was Socrates and Plato who established this tradition of systematic thinking about human issues. Their aim was always one of helping people to live better lives in tune with sound principles and in search of the good and the true. Socrates gave his name to the process, the Socratic method, whereby the teacher acts as midwife, enabling pupils to give birth to their own understanding of the world. The philosophical teacher's discourse with the pupil was always cooperative and critical, following the virtues of orderliness, deliberateness and clarity. The teacher (therapist) and pupil (client) are both active and independent, though the teacher is able to offer experienced guidance.

It becomes clear when doing this, that it helps greatly to have expert guidance in reflecting on ourselves, especially when such reflection involves us having to face up to some of our own errors and mistaken prejudice. We need the extra pair of eyes to see more clearly. Of course, we can get some insights from studying on our own those philosophers who have thought about the complexities of human existence, but without another person present we are limited by the narrowness of our own vision.

KEY POINTS

- Existential philosophers are concerned with what it means to be alive.
- *That* we are is more fundamental than *what* we are.
- The search for truth that existential therapists engage in with their clients is handled like a philosophical research project that cannot be embarked on lightly and requires commitment and full engagement from both.
- While there is an ongoing search for models of living that can improve people's lives, there is no endorsement of any particular model.
- The existential counsellor will attempt to resonate with and articulate all aspects of the client's worldview.

- Clients will be encouraged to explore the polarities and paradoxes that underpin human living in general and their lives in particular.
- The process will consist of careful description of the client's experience and full exploration of its implications, reasons, purpose and consequences, and all interpretations must be verified.
- There is an awareness of the importance of dialogue and exchange of views, where each person is equal and capable of considering what can be learnt from the collaborative exploration.
- There has to be a willingness to test out hypotheses about human living and revise these in the light of new findings.

SOME OF THE MAJOR EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHERS

The following short biographies in chronological order give an idea of the diversity of existential thinking.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) was a Danish philosopher who is sometimes called 'the father of existential thinking'. He wrote in an indirect manner often using pseudonyms and took issue with what he saw as the conformity of nineteenth-century bourgeois society and particularly with its hypocritical way of interpreting Christianity. He advocated learning from anxiety (Angst) and despair and he valued subjective truth over given truth. He believed that we all have to learn to live aesthetically first, then ethically, but that in order to learn to think for ourselves we need to dare to doubt, until we are able to make a leap of faith to find our own personal sense of and relationship to God.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) was a German philosopher who wrote in a poetic and rhetorical manner and criticized what he called the herd mentality of his fellow citizens. An accomplished iconoclast, he opposed all systems especially value-laden ones. He is famous for stating that 'God is dead'. He said that each person must relentlessly question in order to aspire to a sense of truth and reality which goes beyond established values. We have to re-evaluate right and wrong and aspire to become what he called the *Übermensch*: the autonomous superhuman who creates his or her own values and morality, and lives a life of passion and personal affirmative power.

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) was a logician and mathematician who designed a new method for describing and understanding all objects and acts of consciousness, including consciousness itself. He called this process 'phenomenology': the science of how things appear. He said that consciousness is always consciousness of something and can never be separated from its object. This is known as the principle of intentionality. Phenomenology is a procedure for

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allowing us to become more aware of the various ways we prejudge physical, personal, social and ethical situations and to become able to grasp the essence of things directly, through the disciplined use of our intuition.

Martin Buber (1878–1965) was an Austrian Jewish philosopher and theologian. He emphasized that human existence was fundamentally relational. He proposed a distinction between 'I–Thou' and 'I–It' modes of relating, with the latter being more like our everyday relating to objects which is characterized by distance, partiality and exploitation. The former was based on a full and open appraisal and contact with the totality of the other. He described the importance of the space in between two people as it is co-created by them and so changes the quality of their interaction.

Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) was a German psychiatrist and a philosopher who, like Husserl, was dissatisfied with the ability of science to provide any insight into the human condition as we live it. He emphasized the permanent dilemma of the need for a 'worldview' in order not to despair at its absence, and the redemptive power of communication. He argued that it is in the unavoidable 'limit situations' like death, guilt, condemnation, doubt and failure that we are reminded of our existence. He also spoke of the importance of remaining aware of the comprehensive elements of our existence that transcend our everyday preoccupations.

Paul Tillich (1886–1965) was a German-born Protestant theologian who left for the United States in the 1930s. He advocated courage in the face of the anxiety of non-being, and distinguished between 'existential' and 'neurotic' anxiety. Tillich's notion of God is as a symbol of reality that we need to come to terms with in our everyday lives. He was a tutor to Rollo May, whose work he inspired.

Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) was a French philosopher and playwright. He emphasized the basic mystery of existence, and the importance of openness to others, as well as the belief that to live properly requires one to have faith in the harmony for which human existence strives. He spoke of the fidelity to ourselves, to life and to each other and of the need to be prepared to be loyal whatever the future holds in store.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was a German philosopher and is considered one of the most influential of the existential thinkers. His work emphasized the human capacity for resolute awareness, through engagement with the anxiety that is prompted by our awareness of our inevitable death. He also placed emphasis on what he called the ground of Being and argued that human beings had to be the guardians, or shepherds of being. He worked towards the end of his life with the Swiss psychiatrist Medard Boss and also influenced Ludwig Binswanger, a long-time colleague of Freud.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80) was a French philosopher, novelist, playwright and political activist. Through his novels and plays he is probably the best-known existential philosopher. He is the person who coined the term ‘existentialism’ and is the only one who actively claimed to be an existentialist. He emphasized the nothingness at the core of existence that gives us freedom. He argued that most people try to escape this freedom and live in bad faith. He believed that to be free is to make choices and take responsibility as we define ourselves through our actions. We have no excuse not to define our life’s project actively. He moved from a description of the competitive nature of human relations to a more collaborative model of human interaction.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86) was a philosopher who is primarily known for her feminist contribution and her novels which illustrate existential themes. She contributed groundbreaking work on issues of sexuality, gender and old age. She wrote about the ethics of freedom and contingency and spoke of the ambiguity of life and of the importance of being prepared to make new moral choices in each new situation.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) was a French philosopher and phenomenologist who emphasized the embodied nature of human existence. He highlighted the notion of intersubjectivity, which is the idea that there is no real separation between the self and the other. He showed how differently we can think of the world if we stop objectifying and separating ourselves from our experience, becoming aware of the intertwined ambiguity of all human experience.

Albert Camus (1913–60) was a French novelist and philosopher who, like de Beauvoir, is known for his novels. He emphasized that what makes life worthwhile is the struggle against what he called the absurdity, the basic meaninglessness of human existence. He argued that it is this engaged struggle itself that creates meaning.

LIMITS OF HUMAN LIVING: THE GIVENS OF EXISTENCE

One point all these authors agree on is that human life is finite and that this is the basic challenge we have to face. We are thrown into the world and have to accept the non-negotiable givens of our existence.

What we mean by ‘thrown’ is that certain facts of our existence are imposed upon us without any choice, for instance, our genetic make-up, family, gender, race and culture as well as the fact that we are born in the first place. We are thrown into a world that has given characteristics and limits. Our task is to make something of what we have been given. Complaining about not having been given a good enough hand of cards in life will achieve nothing. The hand we are born with is the hand we have to play.

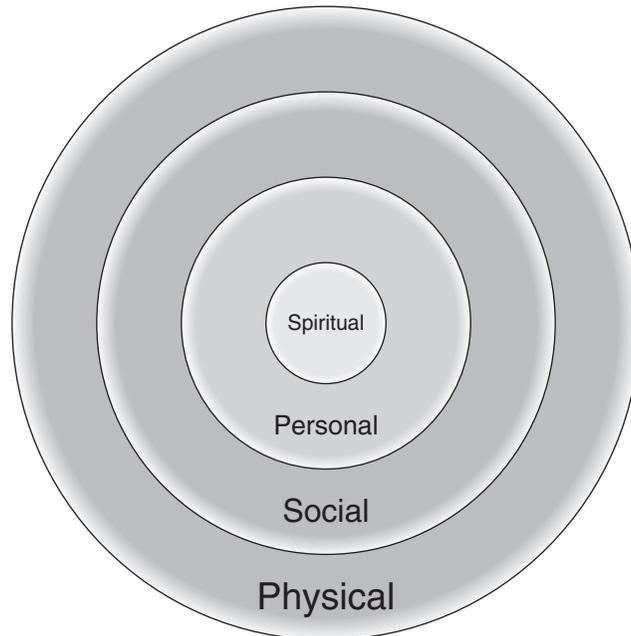


Figure 1.1 The Four dimensions of life

The four dimensions of existence

There is no existential personality theory which divides people into types or seeks to label them. Instead there is a description of the different dimensions of existence with which people from all cultures are confronted in various ways. These are the parameters of human existence.

The way a person is in the world at any particular time of their life can be charted on a general map of human existence (Binswanger, 1963; Yalom, 1980; Deurzen, 2010) which distinguishes four basic dimensions, or worlds of human existence. The four dimensions are represented in Figure 1.1 as concentric spheres. The outer layer represents the physical dimension; the layer below this covers the social dimension, followed by the inner space of the personal dimension with inside it the spiritual core. When we take a section of this sphere, it provides us with a map of the four dimensions of life. Of course, in reality, these realms of existence intertwine and intersect and are never as neatly arranged or separate from each other as this diagram would suggest. They intertwine in different ways for different people. It is a useful tool we can use in our practice to remind us not just of the simultaneous multidimensionality of existence but also of what aspects of their existence clients are currently talking about and, perhaps more importantly, what aspects they are not talking about. A map is simply something we can use to locate and orientate ourselves with. We must take care not to confuse the map for the territory.

Also known as the ultimate concerns, each dimension contains a challenge we engage with in different ways throughout our lives and which has the capacity to

produce anxiety simply by virtue of it being unsolvable. The paradox is that engaging with it can lead to finding the necessary resolve and determination to overcome and transcend it.

Physical dimension

On the physical dimension (*Umwelt*), we relate to our environment and to the givens of the natural world around us. This is the outside ring of our world relations and includes the body we have, the concrete surroundings we find ourselves in, the climate and weather, objects and material possessions and our capacity for health and illness as well as our relationship to our own mortality.

The struggle on this dimension, in general terms, is between the search for domination over the elements and natural law, as in technology, or in sports, and the need to accept the limitations of natural boundaries, as in ecology or old age. While people generally aim for security on this dimension – through health and wealth, much of life brings a gradual disillusionment and realization that such security can only be temporary. Physical illnesses, both great and small, remind us of our mortal frailty.

The very early years of life are predominantly concerned with the physical, with survival; through satisfaction of bodily needs and physical safety. This is what love is about at this stage as well: providing physical comfort, satisfaction and security. Birth is the beginning of our physical existence, death is the end and our life is the space between. Often we return to this state in old age, of needing physical care and safety given to us by others. Paradoxically while everybody has a desire to live a long time, few of us wish to get old. Perhaps because we all know it will happen, we try not to think about it too much. We act as if we are immortal.

Although we know our death will come, we never know when or what it will be like. Most of us would agree with Woody Allen when he says, 'Death doesn't really worry me that much, I'm not frightened about it ... I just don't want to be there when it happens.'

When we say goodbye to a friend we say 'See you soon', with actually no more than a hope that there will be a 'soon'. Yet we have to find the courage to carry on as if there will be a 'soon'. We cannot literally choose to live forever, this is a function of genetics, the condition of our body, and chance, but what we can do is to choose our stance towards our life and this is intimately tied up with the way we see our death. In order to truly live, we all need to determine our relationship with death.

The paradox is that although physical death will kill me, the denial of death will destroy the time I have left but the idea of death will save me in the sense that it will prompt me to live my life more resourcefully and more fully.

The unsolvable dilemma is that mortality is a constant fact of our lives which we can either welcome or deny. We are reminded of it every time something comes to an end. The reality of present and future loss is inscribed in our hearts as much as our desire to postpone or avoid it. It is in the discovery of the physical constraints to existence that we discover the social world.

EXERCISE

Talk to a partner about one of these subjects for five minutes. Your partner just has to listen, not interrupt or ask you anything. Afterwards reflect on what it was like. Did you say what you intended to say?

- What was it like when you were or someone close to you was last ill?
- What was it like when you last had an accident that endangered your life?
- What things do you want to have done before you die?
- Describe yourself physically.

Social dimension

On the social dimension (*Mitwelt*), we relate to others and interact with the public world around us. This dimension includes our response to the culture we live in, as well as to the class and race we belong to and also those we do not belong to.

It is about the presence of other people in the world and the necessity of getting on with them. On the one hand, it sometimes seems easier not to have to deal with others, but, on the other, we need others for our physical and emotional survival and all too often we miss them, or feel lonely without them.

Sooner or later we are all confronted with aloneness and the knowledge that nobody can know what it is like to be me. Nevertheless I am aware that my past, my present and my future are bound up with other people and though we are all very much alike, each one of us is permanently separate from the other. And yet I know I need other people and I need to understand and be understood by other people. Every time we meet and separate from someone who matters to us this is brought home to us.

Each person has a separate body and a separate consciousness and we come up against others in conflict or cooperation. By acquiring fame or other forms of power, we can attain dominance over others, but only temporarily. The paradox therefore is that the awareness of my separateness can help me to understand and to respect the other.

The unsolvable dilemma is to do with our need for individuality combined with our need to be a part of a whole. Fusion and fission are the two inevitable poles of our relations to others.

EXERCISE

Talk to a partner about one of these subjects for five minutes. Your partner just has to listen, not interrupt or ask you anything. Afterwards reflect on what it was like. Did you say what you intended to say? Or did you surprise yourself?

- monogamy
- a relationship you have or had
- being on a desert island alone
- your social existence

Personal dimension

The relationship with oneself (*Eigenwelt*), is about having an inner world with views about one's character, past experience and future possibilities. People search for a feeling of being substantial and having a confident sense of self but life events remind us of personal weakness and can plunge us into confusion when we realize that things do not go the way we planned. Some people are confused about who they are.

We often act as if there is a rule book to life and look for it in different places, including going to counsellors or psychotherapists. Paradoxically it is only when we discover that there is no rule book that we become aware of the personal dimension. The possibility of this happening arises whenever we confront the unexpected, because it evokes anxiety which we then may seek to quell with distractions and prescribed or non-prescribed drugs until, after much evasion and denial, we discover that taking personal responsibility for making up our own mind is in fact the only way forward if we want to get a sense of being truly awake and in charge of our own life.

Sartre (2003) says that 'man is condemned to be free'. By 'condemned', he means that we cannot avoid freedom. The only choice we do not have is not to choose. Only when a person takes responsibility for their own choices can they truly learn about the consequences of their actions, their own authority and hence the meaning of their lives.

There are two ways to misunderstand responsibility: one is to take responsibility for things one has no responsibility for, and the other is to deny responsibility for things that one does have responsibility for. One or the other of these is the cause of most distress in life (apart from major disasters that strike us out of the blue).

This essential human freedom is the freedom to take responsibility *for* one's own actions. It is not a freedom *from* responsibility. A prerequisite for taking responsibility is that the person needs to acknowledge they are free within the constraints of reality to make decisions. What choice means to existential therapists is much more to do with commitment to a course of action. When one is free to choose and owns one's decision, one has earned the right to reap the benefits.

If being human was simply a process of cause and effect, there would be no such thing as creativity or imagination and all of life would be mechanical and predetermined.

The paradox is that when I realize I am weak and vulnerable and that there is no external rule book, I discover that in my freedom I can develop responsibility, stamina and personal strength. As long as I act as if I am invulnerable, I cannot come to terms with the vulnerability of being a person.

The unsolvable dilemma is that even as we make our choices we still look for some unchanging principles to live by.

EXERCISE

Talk to a partner about one of these subjects for five minutes. Your partner just has to listen, not interrupt or ask you anything. Afterwards reflect on what it was like. Did you say what you intended to say?

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- What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the idea of freedom?
- Describe a recent time when things did not go the way you wished. How did it feel?
- Describe the last time you said 'I couldn't help it' or 'They made me do it'.
- Describe the last time you lied.
- Describe yourself personally.

Spiritual dimension

On the spiritual dimension (*Überwelt*), we relate to the unknown and thus create a sense of an ideal world and a personal value system. It is here that we find meaning and purpose through reflection.

The history of Western civilization over the past 500 years has gradually eroded our sense of specialness in the universe. First Copernicus and Galileo pointed out that the Earth was not the centre of the universe, but just one planet circling the sun. We discovered that there were many such solar systems and that the Earth was by no means at the centre of the universe. Then Darwin showed that we are just one of the many species evolving from the same gene pool by natural selection. Finally the work of theoretical physicists like Einstein and Heisenberg dismantled the notion of the objective certainty of knowledge and replaced it with one of ambiguity, relativity and intentionality. This parallels the findings of existential philosophers who argued for a fresh approach to living in the face of the new information we have obtained about the world. In the sense that life is about meaning creating, the spiritual dimension is the central axis of existential therapy.

We cannot help but have certain beliefs and ideas about how everything in life fits together. This is our worldview. It orientates us in the world, defines our attitude towards it and allows us to create meaning. Our value system gives us a sense of right and wrong and enables us to succeed in what the Greeks called 'living the good life'. We like to believe that this is absolute or 'god-given' – that the principles are for all time. But we encounter numerous obstacles that make us feel like giving up and come to realize that the value system we live by is defined by us and us alone. And it is not absolute. This is what is meant by absurdity. Meaninglessness and absurdity are common experiences and most of us fear these so much that we would do anything to avoid them.

For some people this is done through a prescriptive worldview like the dogma of a religion, for others, it is more personal. People create their values in terms of something that matters enough to live or die for, something that may even be ultimately and universally valid. Usually the aim is something that will surpass human mortality like having contributed something valuable to mankind. Instant celebrity can be seen as an easy but flawed way to immortality.

Facing the void and the possibility of nothingness are the indispensable counterparts of this quest for the eternal. The contradictions that have to be faced on this dimension are related to the tension between purpose and absurdity, hope and despair.

EXERCISE

Talk to a partner about one of these subjects for five minutes. Your partner just has to listen, not interrupt or ask you anything. Afterwards reflect on what it was like. Did you say what you intended to say?

- A time when I was not treated the way I wanted by someone.
- My parents' values: those I have adopted and those I baulk at.
- Something I used to believe, but no longer hold to.
- Who I would like to write a thank you letter to or receive one from and why.
- Exploring my views on specific beliefs I have about what happens after death.
- Describe yourself spiritually.

An existential view of religion

Existential philosophers such as Buber and Tillich explored the religious dimension of human life, and some others like Nietzsche and Sartre argued vigorously against it. People often say that God is looking over them and supporting them and that they feel connected to something greater than themselves. Other people are agnostic or atheistic. Whatever we believe is compatible with an existential exploration of spirituality. It is important to know how people conceived of their connection to a reality greater than themselves, be this society, being, the universe, a god or the principle of love. People for whom this basic trust in transcendence is absent will feel as if they are not watched over or safe. They may even feel abandoned or persecuted and try to control events. They are out of touch with the way in which they are connected to the world – what Heidegger meant by being-in-the-world. We are always a constituent part of our own and also of other people's world. Therefore there is neither a force 'out there' nor 'in here', but within us and without us at the same time. We are both/and: separate and yet connected.

Such a force or principle of connectivity is not an interventionistic entity. It just is. Existentially this has to be trusted, and if we can trust ourselves and others and accept our collective dynamic uncertainty, we will be able to take advantage of the chances and opportunities that life offers and we will also be able to take responsibility for these. Alcoholics Anonymous was founded on the insight that the spiritual dimension was lacking in the lives of addicts. AA is rejected by some addicts who are threatened by what they wrongly see as the foundation of AA on religious dogma. In fact, it is founded on the idea of connectedness and trust in self and others. This is the existential meaning of the spiritual.

The paradox is that realizing that there is no grand design prompts us to engage more resiliently with our own life and spurs us on to make our own ethical system in order to make our lives meaningful.

The unsolvable dilemma is that our need for ultimate meaning and purpose persists even as we come to accept the relativity of our existence.

KEY POINTS

- We live simultaneously on four different dimensions: the physical, the social, the psychological and the spiritual.
- Each of these set us different dilemmas and challenges which can only ever be temporarily solved.
- If we do not acknowledge the influence and importance of all the dimensions, our lives will become unbalanced.

LIVING IN TIME

Existentially we think of time as having two dimensions. There is clock time, which, as the name suggests, is measured by the clock, is regular and linear. One minute follows the previous at the same rate and will always do so.

Then there is existential time, and it is more accurate to say that we are temporal, we are in time. It is a defining quality of our existence that we are born, and that we will die. We move in a perpetually changing present with our past behind and future ahead of us. In this sense, the past and future are contained within the present. When we talk about the present, we mean a present that contains all that has happened and all that will happen. Past and future meet in the present. Our task in understanding this is to realize that the way we are is not determined by the past, for the past can change. A simple example of this is that when we are happy we find it easier to remember happy times we have had, and similarly with sad times. Letting go of the idea that we are determined by the past gives us freedom but also brings the responsibility to change. If anything, the future is primary because we are always aware of the certainty of death and the problem of how to live a meaningful life before we die.

KEY POINTS

- The present includes the past and the future.
- Understanding that we are not determined is to realize that we can own our past and future and not to feel it is imposed upon us. So we become active creators of our lives and not passive recipients of it.

LIVING WITH PARADOX

All life's paradoxes are related to one or more of the four dimensions of existence and clients often try to solve them with an either/or decision. Most problem-solving techniques involve this. But deciding between alternatives such as: 'Should I do this or should I do that?' cannot be solved by rhetoric or by argument. Rhetoric is useful where certainty is desirable, facts are clear and solutions seem permanent. Dialectical decision-making is usually more appropriate in relation to human issues, which are not mechanical but are about understanding, processing and finally a personal commitment to a course of action.

In dialectics, an initial statement – or thesis – 'should I do this...?' – gives rise to a counter-statement – or antithesis – 'or that?' – and the opposition between the two is resolved by something which contains elements of both, but is different from either. This synthesis then becomes a new thesis, and so on. For Socrates, it was a means of overcoming opposites through dialogue in order to get closer to the truth.

Existential therapy proceeds by dialectically facing up to conflict and polarity, learning to tolerate ambiguity and the unexpected in order to arrive at a synthesis which, because of the dynamic nature of existence, is always temporary and provisional.

Life in fact is given its excitement by this ambiguity and if we are able to take the paradoxes of existence in our stride and tolerate the anxiety that comes with the freedom of the both/and, we are more likely to live a satisfying life.

Table 1.1 presents the paradoxes that regularly confront us. It is only if we face the basic challenge at each level that we gain new strength. If we try to avoid it, we lose more than we gain.

TABLE 1.1 THE PARADOXES OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

	Challenge to face up to	Potential gain	Potential loss
Physical	Death	Living life to the full	An unlived life or constant fear
Social	Separateness and loneliness	To understand and to be understood	Bullying or being bullied; dependency
Personal	Vulnerability and weakness	Discovering stamina and strength	Egocentricity, narcissism and self-destructiveness
Spiritual	Meaninglessness	Evolving a system of ethics to live by	Fanaticism, fundamentalism apathy

KEY POINTS

- Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved.
- Paradoxes can only be approached in a both/and way and also can never be solved once and for all.
- We have to be willing to face up to our troubles.

ANXIETY AND THE GIVENS OF EXISTENCE

Awareness of these givens of existence gives rise to what existential philosophers call Anxiety, Angst, Ontological Anxiety or Existential Anxiety. Anxiety in this sense is spelt with a capital 'A', to distinguish it from the more familiar everyday experience of anxiety with a small 'a'. It is a theoretical concept and no one feels Anxiety as such. Instead each everyday anxiety or worry we have, great and small, can be related back to one or more of the basic paradoxes. Since these can never be removed, only evaded or denied, the task of life is to appreciate, understand and live with them. Heidegger says that if we move too far away from our anxieties about the facts of life, we are drawn back to them by the 'call of conscience'. To live is to never be completely safe and it is this engagement with the paradoxes and dilemmas of living that gives human existence its excitement and sense of aliveness. It is in this tension that we find the source of all true creativity. Anxiety is a teacher, not an obstacle or something to be removed or avoided.

Humanistic psychology talks about the person being drawn to achieve their potential as if there were a force for good that moves the person forwards, like a seed that seeks to expand and grow. The existential view is rather different. The paradoxes and dilemmas of each of the four dimensions give boundaries to our lives and the tension thus created motivates people in various ways to explore the space within the boundaries. Growth is not necessarily positive and change is not always for the better. We have to open our eyes to the various possibilities and dangers that exist, and choose our path. Existence is created out of this and without our continuous aspirations and desperations, ups and downs, attachments and losses, there would be no human meaning.

KEY POINT

- Anxiety pervades all aspects of existence and engaging rather than evading or denying it gives life its excitement and meaning.

THE MIND AND THE BODY

Contemporary thinking encourages us to believe not just that the body is separate from the world, but also that the mind is separate from the body. But it is just as difficult to imagine a body without a mind as it is to imagine a mind without a body.

We get into this muddle because we have displaced our attention from our experience as embodied beings into the abstract notion of an independent material body which behaves like a machine, but has sensations, thoughts and feelings, within.

Existential therapists do not accept a functional distinction between the mind, the body and the world, preferring to think of the human being as an embodied consciousness that is able to reflect upon itself always in a context.

In fact, the most fundamental mode of interaction we have is with the world. Our identity, the way we think about ourselves is inseparable from the world. Our worldview

is literally the view of the world from here, from and including this body. It is not just the perspective we have on the world, it is the way we experience and interpret the world we are a part of.

It is not simply cognitive but more like an atmosphere we both absorb and exude. In fact, we take it so much for granted we are often unaware of our particular way of perceiving the world. In art, perspective refers to both a view of the world and to the view of the world from *here*.

The nature of our body dictates the nature of our worldview. The rise of technology has contributed to this separation of the body from the world. Until the late nineteenth century, the beginning of the scientific age, all measurements were made in terms of the body, for example, an inch was the width of a thumb, a foot was the length of an adult foot and a furlong, a furrow-long, was how far a ploughing team could be driven without resting. Everyone knew this. With the advent of standardized and objective measures this connection to the body has been lost.

There are many phrases that we use, often without thinking, that refer to the way we interact with the world through our body. We talk about someone being a 'pain in the neck'. We refer to someone's weak point as their 'Achilles' heel', from the Greek myth. When we feel confident, we talk about feeling 'grounded'. When we are happy, we feel 'light'. When we are depressed, we feel 'heavy'.

As children we experience settings like playgrounds as large and when we return to them as adults we are surprised to find that they are not as large as we remember. They only seemed large because we were small. People smaller than average often dislike crowds because they literally cannot see their way out. For anyone who loses their mobility, the world becomes a different place, somewhere they cannot inhabit with the same freedom.

Quite often we think in terms of whether our body is acceptable by societal norms. We think about it as an 'it', an object of approval or disapproval. This makes the body, and indeed our self, into a possession or a thing. In contemporary culture the human being is in danger of becoming standardized.

Existential therapists consider that the body is not something we have. It is what we are. Nietzsche talks about the 'intelligent body' in the sense that we need to listen to the body and to be at one with the body. When we lose this ability to listen, we involve ourselves in destructive activities. We see this most characteristically in people with eating disorders who have lost or somehow learnt to deny the ability to know whether they are hungry or not. Food or its absence is then used to separate the person from the message of their body and food and its consequences take on another meaning for a person, much more to do with their acceptability as human beings or their relationship to a depriving or stifling world. Consequently they eat when they are not hungry or do not eat when they are hungry in an attempt to gain some balance.

Moreover, focussing on intake of food becomes a means of finding distraction from the paradoxes and dilemmas of existence. Focussing on the appearance of the body and its shortcomings is seen in its most extreme form as Body Dysmorphic Disorder, where people end up having an erroneous sense of their body shape.

The philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949) described the problem as a 'category error', because the mind is not a thing at all and therefore is not fixed, and we should not be

talking about 'the mind' but of the process of 'minding'. We have to remember that mind is a verb, not a noun.

EXERCISE

Find a quiet space on your own and sit as comfortably as you can, shut your eyes and scan through your body starting with your toes and describe each part of your body to yourself. Don't hurry and move through your body slowly, giving enough time to each part. What was it like?

Now find a partner to do the same thing with. Sit facing each other a few feet apart with your eyes shut and go through your body as before. What difference does it make for both of you to do it in the presence of the other?

Now with the same partner sit opposite each other, and look at each other without talking, moving your eyes over the other's body stopping on parts you wish to stop on, for 5 minutes. What was it like?

KEY POINTS

- Neither the mind nor the body are things that we have, they are things that we are – they are inseparable aspects of our being.
- Being-in-the-world refers to the way we are always making and being made by the world around us. We are inseparable from the world.