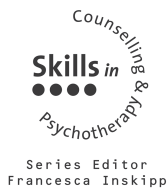


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1

THE FRAMEWORK OF EXISTENTIAL THERAPY

‘In the mountains of truth you will never climb in vain: either you will get up higher today or you will exercise your strength so as to be able to get up higher tomorrow.’

Friedrich Nietzsche

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 her or his 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, methods 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 the way we are who we are and the way we understand our lives, 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 we can never ignore the needs of others when making personal decisions, but neither can we allow others to entirely determine us 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 then we define ourselves later. Through our existing our essence is gradually shaped.

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, on the contrary, 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 her or

his 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 the bio-chemical processes in our brains define us. 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 their own survival, 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 to be our essence, our nature, our sense of self, in fact evolves over time and is 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 and on our particular way of being that creates a sense of self and it is this reflection that plays the major role in what we are and become.

It is our understanding of these matters 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.

Make your own list and then order the items in your list from least significant to most significant. Starting with the least significant, go through each item 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.

SOME OF THE MAJOR EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHERS

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

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) 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’ (nihilism). 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 her or his 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 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 US 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 existential thinkers. His work emphasized the human capacity for resolute awareness, through engagement with the anxiety that is prompted by our awareness of time and especially 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, co-creating the method of Daseinsanalysis, 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 showed that there was nothingness at the core of human existence, thus giving us freedom. He argued that most people try to escape this freedom by living 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 for her novels, which illustrate existential themes. She contributed ground-breaking 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. She emphasized the importance of collaboration.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) was a French philosopher and phenomenologist who emphasized the embodied nature of human existence. He highlighted Husserl’s 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 brings us into existence and allows us to create meaning.

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 (or ‘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, as we need to create a worldview for ourselves to find meaning in our life. The task of the existential therapist is to make this philosophical questioning practical, concrete 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 own assumptions about life as much as we help clients question theirs.

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 new insights. Human problems are the puzzles that help us understand the overall picture of life.

EXERCISE

Think of a time when you were mistaken about your evaluation of someone: let yourself think back to how this mistaken judgment 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 therapist will attempt to resonate with and articulate all aspects of the client's worldview.
- Clients will be encouraged to explore the polarities, tensions 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 open 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 THERAPISTS

The following short biographies, presented in chronological order, give an idea of the diversity of existential therapy (see also Table 1.1).

Ludwig Binswanger (1881–1966) was a Swiss psychiatrist who worked with Carl Jung and Eugen Bleuler and was a lifelong friend of Freud. He was the first physician to see the therapeutic significance of existential and phenomenological ideas, and was influenced in this by Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl and Martin Buber. He said that the human being can only be understood in the totality of his/her existence, the *Weltanschauung* or world-design, which is how we view and open up to the world around us.

Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) was a German psychiatrist who became a philosopher and who worked his entire life towards a more philosophical understanding of psychiatric problems. His magnum opus on psychopathology proposed an alternative mode of working with problems in living.

Eugene Minkowski (1885–1972) was a Polish-born French psychiatrist who experimented with an existential way of working with his patients in Paris. His alternative understanding of depression and schizophrenia and his emphasis on time were radical new departures at his time and remained influential on many authors.

Erich Fromm (1900–80), born to Jewish parents in Germany, was a philosopher and psychoanalyst who moved to the US in 1934. His writings are social, political and spiritual as well as philosophical and psychological. A major contribution is that he understood freedom as an aspect of human nature that we can either embrace or escape, but that escaping it is the root of all psychological conflicts. Another main contribution is that he saw love primarily as interpersonal creativity and distinguished it from everyday notions of romantic love, which he saw as pathological.

Medard Boss (1903–90) was a Swiss psychiatrist. He was influenced in his early career by Freud and later worked with Eugen Bleuler, Carl Jung and Ludwig Binswanger, who introduced him to the works of philosopher Martin Heidegger, with whom he had a 25-year mentoring friendship. Out of this relationship he developed Daseinsanalysis, which is regarded as being the first systematic description of existential psychotherapy. He contributed greatly to an existential understanding of dreams as relating to the person's existential nature rather than simply from their unconscious.

Viktor Frankl (1905–97) was an Austrian Jewish doctor from Vienna, whose family was exterminated in the concentration camps during the holocaust. He himself conceived of many of his therapeutic ideas whilst interned in Auschwitz. His own existential method is called 'logotherapy' or 'meaning therapy' and his objective was to help people retrieve lost meaning in their lives. His method has been particularly influential in Latin America.

Rollo May (1909–94) was an American existential psychologist. He came to psychology late after a career in the ministry. Influenced by Adler and the North American humanistic tradition and also by Kierkegaard, he wrote *The Meaning of Anxiety* with the general reader in mind after contracting TB. He was also a close friend of Paul Tillich, who had a significant influence on his later work. In 1958, he edited the ground-breaking book *Existence* with Ernst Angel and Henri Ellenberger, which first introduced existential ideas to therapy as distinctly different from psychoanalysis.

Joseph Fabry (1909–99) was an American logotherapist who worked with Viktor Frankl and enabled logotherapy to become established in the US as a meaning-based therapy, contributing the important book *The Pursuit of Meaning*.

James Bugental (1915–2008) was influenced in his early years by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow but was greatly influenced by reading May, Angel and

Ellenberger's *Existence*. His major contributions are practical and they focus on the nature and value of therapeutic presence, and the challenge to translate this into an authentic and responsible life.

Hans Cohn (1916–2004), born into a Jewish family in Germany, came to the UK in 1949 via Czechoslovakia, Poland and Canada. From an early training in psychoanalysis he developed parallel but connected interests in groups and in Heideggerian existentialism and was an editor of *Existential Analysis*, the journal of the Society for Existential Analysis. He taught and influenced many UK existential therapists between 1988 and 2002 and wrote two influential books and a number of papers.

Gion Condrau (1919–2006), born in Switzerland, became a significant Daseinsanalyst who attended the Zollikon seminars with Heidegger and Boss. He became the successor of Boss after Boss died in 1990 and contributed much to the recognition of Daseinsanalysis.

Thomas Szasz (1920–2012), born in Budapest, moved to the US in 1938. He was a lifelong libertarian, moral philosopher and critic of the ethical, scientific and social control foundations of psychiatry. He said that psychiatric diagnosis was a socio-political construction designed to mystify experience and to reduce people's freedom and responsibility. In his view, the metaphor of mental illness gave false legitimacy to psychiatry, which both coerced the innocent and allowed the insanity defence to excuse the guilty.

Aaron Esterson (1923–99), born in Glasgow into poverty and deprivation, studied medicine on leaving the Royal Navy in 1945. He came to prominence as a co-author with R.D. Laing of *Sanity Madness and the Family*, which argued that the symptoms and signs of schizophrenia were socially intelligible. He developed this idea further in *The Leaves of Spring*. Both books reflect his lifelong assertion that the fundamental principles of existential psychotherapy are moral and ethical, and not technical or medical.

R.D. Laing (1927–89), born in Glasgow and trained as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, was one of the first to popularize the existential approach to therapy. His first book, *The Divided Self*, is as influential now as it was when first published in 1960. In it he questioned the established view on schizophrenia and described how ontological insecurity may lead to alienation when a person is unable to stand up to societal and family pressures imposed upon them. Laing was a prolific writer and a mercurial and occasionally divisive though enormously charismatic figure who continues to influence therapists of all perspectives. He created a movement of therapeutic communities, formed by the Philadelphia Association and the Arbours, to offer emotionally unstable people an alternative to psychiatric care.

Peter Lomas (1924–2010), a one-time colleague and contemporary of Laing's, was a quieter though no less influential figure. His belief in the necessity of psychotherapy having an existential foundation dates from the 1960s and his dissatisfaction with psychoanalysis. His view of the therapeutic relationship as both something very special and also something intensely ordinary is more to do with practical wisdom than anything else.

Irvin Yalom (1931–), a US psychiatrist and psychotherapist, is perhaps the most well-known existential writer, and many people's first contact with existential therapy has been through his book *Love's Executioner*. A prolific writer, he is also known for the unique way he has woven philosophical themes into his many psychological novels.

Paul Wong (1937–), born in Northern China and raised in Hong Kong, established himself in Toronto, Canada and is the founder and president of the Meaning-Centred Counselling Institute. He is a logotherapist who has developed his own form of integrative existential and positive psychotherapy and has published many books and also set up the International Network on Personal Meaning.

Betty Cannon (1943–), US psychotherapist and writer, has applied Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas to psychotherapeutic theory and practice. Her book, *Sartre and Psychoanalysis*, influenced by her long-time colleague and translator of Sartre, Hazel Barnes, is considered a classic in the field of existential psychology. She lives and works in Boulder, Colorado, where she developed a form of existential therapy named applied existential psychotherapy (AEP).

Alice Holzey-Kunz (1943–) is a Swiss Daseinsanalyst trained by Medard Boss and author of many papers and an important book on Daseinsanalysis.

Erik Craig (1944–) is a prominent American Daseinsanalyst from Santa Fe, New Mexico who trained and worked with Medard Boss and who has done work in the hermeneutic tradition of dream analysis.

Alfried Längle (1951–), a doctor and psychologist from Vienna, worked with Frankl for many years before expanding logotherapy into a method named 'existential analysis'. He has tirelessly lectured in Latin America and other parts of the world to spread this method and published numerous books, mostly in German till recently.

Emmy van Deurzen (1951–), born in the Netherlands, studied in France before settling in the UK in 1977 and starting the first existential therapy training programme at Regent's College (now University) and then at the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling at the Existential Academy. She founded the Society for Existential Analysis and its journal *Existential Analysis* in 1988. The author, co-author and editor of many books, she has written extensively on the application of philosophical ideas to therapeutic work with individuals, couples, groups and organizations.

Ernesto Spinelli (1949–), a psychologist, existential psychotherapist and writer of Italian extraction and born in Canada, trained as a psychologist in the UK. He began working with Emmy van Deurzen at Regent's College and after she left, took over the running of the school and society she had created. Influenced originally by Carl Rogers and the US humanistic-existential tradition, his focus is mostly on the relational aspects of existential-phenomenological practice.

Kirk Schneider (1956–) is an American practitioner and writer on contemporary existential-humanistic psychology. Influenced by James Bugental and Rollo May, he has authored or co-authored many books that extend the boundaries of humanistic psychology into societal and spiritual arenas. He is most known for his contribution of awe-based practice.

Table 1.1 Existential practitioners

Pioneers	Daseins-analysis	Humanistic-Existential	Existential-Integrative	Logotherapy	European School
Ludwig Binswanger 1881–1966	Medard Boss 1904–1990	Rollo May 1909–1994	Thomas Szasz 1920–2012	Viktor Frankl 1905–1997	Ronald D. Laing 1927–1989
Karl Jaspers 1883–1969	Gion Condrau 1919–2006	James Bugental 1915–2008	Aaron Esterson 1923–1999	Joseph Fabry 1909–1999	Hans Cohn 1916–2004
Eugene Minkowski 1885–1972	Alice Holzey-Kunz 1943–	Irvin Yalom 1931–	Peter Lomas 1924–2010	Paul Wong 1937–	Ernesto Spinelli 1949–
Erich Fromm 1900–1980	Erik Craig 1944–	Kirk Schneider 1956–	Betty Cannon 1943–	Alfried Längle 1951–	Emmy van Deurzen 1951–

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’ and ‘given’ is that certain facts of our existence are imposed upon us without us having any choice in the matter. For instance, our genetic make-up, the family, gender, historical moment and culture we are born into are realities that we cannot argue with or alter. The same can be said of the fact that we are born in the first place. We are thrown into a world that existed before us and 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.

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 or map we can apply 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.

Also known as the ‘ultimate concerns’, each dimension contains particular challenges or dilemmas we engage with in different ways throughout our lives and which have the capacity to produce anxiety simply by virtue of their being unsolvable. The paradox is that engaging with these challenges can lead to finding the necessary resolve and determination to overcome and transcend them in a new way.

Physical dimension

On the physical dimension (*Umwelt*, or literally ‘surround world’), we relate to our environment and to the givens of the natural world around us. This is the outside and most fundamental ring of our world relations and includes the body we have, the

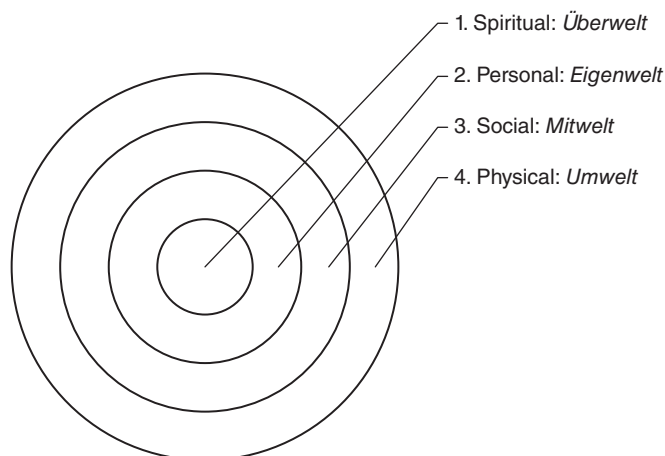


Figure 1.1 The four dimensions of life

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. Conception is the beginning of our physical existence, but birth marks the moment when we become viable and capable of independent survival. Death is the end of that viability and our life occupies the space in between these extremes. We start out very vulnerable and need protection to survive. Often we return to a state of vulnerability in old age, when once again we need physical care and safety provided by others. Paradoxically while everybody has a desire to live a long time, few of us wish to get so old that we become incompetent. 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, as this is a function of genetics and biology, 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.

EXERCISE

Talk to a partner about one of the subjects below for 5 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 or someone close to you was seriously 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* or literally ‘with world’), 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, social, age and gender groups 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 hand, 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 different. 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, social superiority or other forms of power, we can attain dominance over others, but only temporarily.

EXERCISE

Talk to a partner about one of the following subjects for 5 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* or literally ‘own world’) 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 rulebook to life and look for it in different places, including going to counsellors or psychotherapists. It is only when we discover that there is no rulebook, whenever something unexpected happens, that we become aware of the personal dimension.

This evokes anxiety which we then may seek to quell with distractions and/or 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 your 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 than it is to do with the many options we always have available to us. Once you are free to choose and own your decisions, you have 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. In fact, life is complex and often contradictory. By committing to an ethical choice of action we create order and meaning in life.

EXERCISE

Talk to a partner about one of the following subjects for 5 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 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* or literally 'over world') we relate to the unknown and to the ideas that we use to make sense of existence. We create a

worldview and a sense of an ideal world and a personal value system in this way. It is here that we find meaning and purpose through reflection. Some might think of this dimension as the philosophical or ideological dimension. Others might see the spiritual as being all about religion.

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 just one planet circling the Sun and not 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 frequently encounter 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 to find something that will surpass human mortality, such as having contributed something valuable and lasting to mankind. Instant celebrity can be seen as an easy and direct but ultimately flawed path 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 the following subjects for 5 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 reject.

- Something I used to believe, but no longer hold true.
- 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, while others like Nietzsche and Sartre argued vigorously against it.

People often say that they know that God is looking over them and supporting them and that consequently they feel connected to something greater than themselves. Other people while defining themselves as agnostics or atheists will still have a sense of their position in the universe. Whatever we believe is important to us and can be explored in an existential manner, as a manifestation of our worldview, our philosophical or spiritual outlook. It is impossible not to have a philosophical view, though we may be unaware of our own beliefs and values.

It is important to know how people conceive of their connection to a reality greater than themselves, whether they think of it as society, being, the universe, a god or the principle of love or any other overarching principle or entity. Every person experiences something as transcending them, even if it is just nature, the solar system or their forebears. People for whom the idea of transcendence is taboo or absent will often experience a permanent and profound background feeling of insecurity and lack of safety. They may even feel abandoned or persecuted and try to control events. They are out of touch with the way they are connected to the world. They deny their sense of being-in-the-world. They may carry an isolating sense of grandiosity or damning personal duty and responsibility.

Existentially we are a constituent part of our own and other people's worlds. We co-constitute each other. Inasmuch as there is a force, it is both within us and without us at the same time. We are both/and: separate and connected.

Such a force or principle of connectivity is not interventionist or judgmental as understood by some fundamentalist religions. It just is. It is life. Existentially life has to be trusted, and if we can do this and accept our collective dynamic uncertainty, we will not only be able to take advantage of the chances and opportunities that life offers but we will also be able to take responsibility for the consequences of the choices we make and accept the limits of our capacity to take the blame.

Jung was influential in the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which is based on the insight that this spiritual dimension, this connectedness, was lacking in the lives of addicts. AA is rejected by some addicts who feel threatened when they experience the AA method as being based in religious dogma. In fact, it may be the idea of connectedness and trust in self and others that may be felt as threatening. In existential therapy people are enabled to discover the ways in which they can rely on the universe, on themselves, on ideas and on other people, and to accept the limits of this

reliance. Finding a centre of balance in this way can be very important to making progress in life and to finding meaning. With a background sense of philosophical clarity and trust people gain a sense of direction and purpose.

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.
- Spirituality is not reserved for religion, but extends to any views and beliefs we hold about the world: it purports to our philosophical convictions;

LIVING IN TIME

We usually think of time in one way and we call this ‘clock time’, which, as the name suggests, is regular and linear. One minute follows the previous at the same rate and will always do so, because clock time has been set by cultural agreement to relate to the revolution of the Earth around its axis. Time is thus defined by the passing of days and nights. We separate out what happened yesterday from what is happening today and what may happen tomorrow. The past is gone, the present is here and the future is yet to come. Clock time puts an emphasis on causation in the sense that the past leads to the present and therefore seems to cause it. Most therapeutic theories define time in this clock time sense. They see human development as linear and deterministic. They understand people’s present problems as caused by problems in the past. But although in one sense this view makes life easier in that it makes it more predictable and simpler to understand, in fact clock time is simply a cultural convention and is a product of our industrialized society. It separates us from our dynamic humanity, from our interactive present experience and from our responsibility for our destiny.

Existentially, time does not exist outside us. It is not an entity in itself. It is a made-up idea which has little validity outside of human cultural context. It is, however, integral to the way we structure our meaning world. Time is the sea we swim in. We experience time in the way we hear a melody: continuously, rather than as separate notes. We gain much of our daily meaning from our need to make something of the short period available to us between birth and death. It is therefore more accurate to say that we are temporal creatures, since we are in time. It is not something that we passively have, it is something that we are actively being.

Existentially, we are primarily future directed in the sense that not only do we do everything for a purpose but that we are always aware of the certainty of our future

death and of the problem of having to find a way to live a meaningful life before this happens.

But being future directed means that we cannot help but also think about our past. How we came to be who we are. How we made ourselves. This is what Heidegger meant when he said that our past comes to us out of our future. The future requires us to look at our past and brings it back to mind, to learn from. When this happens, it makes us present to ourselves. This is the existential meaning of the present.

In this sense then, the past, the present and the future are simultaneous. The present emerges out of the encounter between past and future. Our lives are threaded together from past, present and future and we weave our worlds from the way in which we entwine experiences.

We can meet this realisation in one of two ways:

- ◆ *Inauthentically*, by seeing ourselves as caused by the past and by passively awaiting the pre-ordained or desired future to come to us. This is what Charlie Brown does in Figure 1.2. By continuing to deny the possibilities of free action we had in the past, we condemn ourselves to repeat our previous mistakes and reinforce the illusion of causation, often blaming others or events for our difficulties and disappointments.
- ◆ *Authentically*, by transcending determinism by considering circumstances as opportunities for acts of self-defining freedom whose consequences we can then own. In this way we actively make the future different from the past. It is not hard to recall moments in our own lives when we have done this and to remember how affirming it was. This can be hard to achieve and to maintain but is crucial to authentic living.

In this way we know existentially that the future is not determined by the past, that the past can change. Charlie Brown has an inkling of this, in the sense that he is disturbed by it, but will not take the opportunity for free action, preferring to retreat into clock time mode and remain stuck. Life in fact is the product of chance and opportunity and responds to our passive fatalism or active engagement.



Figure 1.2 *Peanuts* comic strip

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An everyday 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 continuous responsibility to change.

In therapy we need to try to promote awareness of alternative courses of action that both can be taken now and might have been taken in the past, and to explore the connections between them. We also need to be mindful that powerful feelings will be evoked when clients realize that things happened as a consequence of their own choices and actions. This awareness is not simply cognitive, it is experiential and seeps through our entire way of life. It has the potential to challenge everything we thought we knew. It is active not passive, and impacts directly on our attitude and state of mind. To realize that our past experiences were chosen is a profoundly revolutionary discovery, since it means we have the power and possibility to affect the future as well and make new choices now. This presents us with our existential responsibility.

KEY POINTS

- Time is not just about clock time.
- 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.
- Living in time is to 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 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 more appropriate with respect to human issues, which are not mechanical but are about understanding, processing and a personal commitment to a course of action. 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 solution, 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. Tolerating ambiguity and the possibility of change is essential for creativity.

Table 1.2 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 1.2 Paradoxes of human existence

	Challenge	Face challenge: gain	Avoid challenge: loss
Physical	Death and pain	Life to the full	Unlived life or constant fear
Social	Loneliness and rejection	Understand and be understood	Bullying or being bullied
Personal	Weakness and failure	Strength and stamina	Narcissism or self-destruction
Spiritual	Meaninglessness and futility	Finding an ethic to live by	Fanaticism or 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.
- Ambiguity is essential for creativity.
- 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, denied or faced, the task of life is precisely 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 and vitality. Anxiety is a teacher, not an obstacle or something to be removed or avoided.

THE EXISTENTIAL AND THE HUMANISTIC VIEW OF GROWTH

Humanistic psychology talks about the person being supported to achieve their potential as if there were a force for good that can move the person forwards naturally, like a seed that will grow and develop into one particular plant as long as the conditions are right. 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 and limits. It is that the unsolvable dilemmas of life create a perpetual tension, and meaning and purpose is born out of this tension. As long as we are alive we are in this tension and our potentiality is open to us. Existentially we embody the quality of potentiality and this means that we have both the freedom and the responsibility to live, choose and own our responses to the paradoxes and dilemmas we meet in life. Existentially, as we are perpetually in a state of becoming, we never achieve our full potential.

Growth is not necessarily positive and change is not always for the better. There is decay as well as development and there are always dangers along the way. We have to open our eyes to the various possibilities and limitations that exist and that we are inexorably confronted with. We have to choose our path carefully.

Existence is created out of a mass of contradictory tensions and without our continuous aspirations and desperations, ups and downs, attachments and losses, there would be no human meaning and no motivation to move ahead by making the best possible choices.

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. Since the mind is pretty much synonymous with the brain and the brain is an essential part of the body, it is clear that body and mind are wrapped up in each other like peas in a pod. Similarly body and mind are contiguous with the world they are embedded in, as they cannot exist without a world to sustain them. We get into a muddle because we have displaced our attention from our experience as embodied beings into the abstract notion of an independent material body that 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. We are constantly interspersed and engaged with it. 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 the way in which we approach the world and our attitude towards it. We do not passively perceive, in the sense of receive, the world. We are, as Heidegger said, a source of light that illuminates our meaning world. This is what we mean when we 'shed light on' a subject. It is not simply cognitive but more like an atmosphere we both absorb and exude. Heidegger referred to this as 'mood' in the sense that it saturates our lived world with meaning. We are attuned to the world and absorb its atmospheres. We transform these and render them back as moods, which in turn affect the world. Eugene Gendlin referred to this as the 'felt-sense' whose meaning we can become aware of and understand by the method of focusing (this is referred to in Chapter 5). In fact, most of the time we do not notice the interconnected nature of our experience in the world. We take it so much for granted that 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. In life we have to learn to understand that there are other just as valid views of the world and that our own views change as we encounter the world from new perspectives.

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.

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?

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 remembered. 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 facility.

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.

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. It is dynamic, not static.

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 our body in order to become embodied. When we lose this ability to listen when as Fromm (1995) says, 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.

Concentrating on food intake and its consequences becomes a means of distracting oneself from the paradoxes and dilemmas of existence and is seen in its most extreme form as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), where people end up having a disproportionate sense of their body shape.

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 and constantly interact with it.

ONLINE CONTENT

- ◆ Video on Emmy van Deurzen's overview of Existential Therapy.
-