

Existential Psychology as a Response to the Challenges of the 21st Century

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What seems to me the most remarkable both in the open, compassionate and frank landmark manifesto of Paul Wong (2004) and in the no less compassionate replies to it, is that we're in the point of transformation of a number of existential psychologies, rather successfully developed throughout the XXth century, to THE existential psychology.

It seems to me rather evident that there is a unified conceptual field behind different versions of existentially oriented psychological writings, clearly distinct from other schools in psychology. More than this, we have quite a rich tradition of existential psychological theorizing, so that the task of positioning existential psychology as distinct from existential philosophy (without denying the links between them) is quite up to date. That's what, in my perception, Paul Wong's editorial is about.

However, my impression is that we are no longer under the "long shadows of Kirkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and Husserl" (Wong, 2004, p. 1). Paradoxically, now the distribution and acceptance of existential views in the general public, thanks to the brilliant books by Victor Frankl, Irvin Yalom, Rollo May and others, is far ahead of their distribution and acceptance in the professional community. Existential psychologists are thus in a successful dialogue with "people on the street" over the heads of their more hard-boiled colleagues.

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We have a number of schools in existential psychology developed relatively independent of one another. The European branch, which includes the Swiss school of Dasein analysis (L. Binswanger, M. Boss) and the Viennese school of logotherapy (V. Frankl and his followers), is based primarily on philosophical ideas of Husserl, Heidegger, and Jaspers. The American branch (R. May, J. Bugental, I. Yalom, S. Maddi) refers to Kirkegaard, Sartre, and Tillich as the main philosophical roots. There are also groups of followers of the dialogical views of M. Buber and M. Bakhtin, and some attempts to build integrative frameworks. Only due to some strange bias, E. Fromm's and G. Kelly's contributions are very seldom regarded in the existentialist context — Fromm's analysis of human situation (Fromm, 1956) and Kelly's ontology of the human being facing the permanent challenge to change (Kelly, 1969) are probably the best explications of existentialist views on the human being and human dilemma. I don't even mention a mighty Russian existentialist tradition, very poorly known in the West. All of these schools speak the same language with the same key concepts — being, living, changing, world, meaning, openness, presence, possibility, transcendence, authenticity, dialogue, love, responsibility, freedom, choice, consciousness, future, anxiety, time, death, courage, creativity, — and easily understand each other despite different emphases. True, "any attempt to pigeonhole existential psychology within a particular philosophy, school or methodology is to lose sight of its richness and limit its potential for addressing human concerns" (Wong, 2004, p. 2). We existential psychologists are free but lonely; "it is inconceivable that one can be a complete disciple of anyone else and still be an existentialist" (Bugental, 1981, p. 19). We can't escape our loneliness since it is our

choice, but the time has come to intensify the dialogue and to transform the possibility of THE existential psychology to some facticity. Responsibility can never be given to someone, it can only be taken. My deepest gratitude and support to Paul Wong for the courage to do this.

Existentialism must be defined through some anthropological presumptions. Today the main opponent view, contradictory to existentialist position, is what V. Frankl (1979) called potentialism – the belief that there are some inborn potentialities that would unfold themselves in favourable conditions. This view is represented by C. Rogers and early A. Maslow (later Maslow evidently drifted toward an existentialist view). The existentialist message is: no working elevator available — walk up yourself; there are no conditions that would automatically produce a desired result; there are no factors that would explain and predict behavior (“It is a mistake to assume that behavior is a dependent variable. For the subject, it is independent variable” – Kelly, 1969, p. 33).

In fact, the existentialist view is not always true, because people often deny their faculty to transcend both internal and external factors influencing their behaviour. Most often traditional deterministic explanations do work perfectly. The point is that human beings may function at different levels – either at the subhuman level(s) when everything may be precisely deduced from the constellation of internal and external independent variables (dispositions, drives, stimuli, social expectations, reinforcements etc.), or at human level when one mediates the influences through the *pause* (May, 1981) — and fills this pause with a new type of self-created determinants. “Circumstances and motives dominate human being inasmuch as (s)he allows them to do so” (Hegel, 1927, p. 45). One fundamental fact of the psychology of

motivation is that when our consciousness is not much involved in the process of choosing between a number of options, a psychologist can calculate and predict the most attractive of them and the resulting choice. But when we switch on the consciousness to make our decision, we find that we may choose any option, voluntarily re-direct the motivational energy to any (without exceptions) of the options we can imagine! There is no choice that couldn't be made!

What follows from the above is that human beings are both determined and self-determined — at different levels and in different moments. Traditional psychology describes and predicts the human being as a determined being — and that turns out to be true for 90% of the population in 90% of the cases — when the conditions are stable, and the individual is satisfied with what (s)he has and does not strive to anything beyond successful adjustment. But there are at least two kinds of situations where this kind of explanation just does not work. First — the moments of crises, losses, disasters, when the life-world is suddenly crushed and no “factors” can rule the decisions, the individual is face-to-face with the world. And the world today is becoming less stable and predictable than ever; this presents a new challenge and a new demand for the existential way of thought. September 11, 2001, has become a sad lesson of existentialism, showing again that any stability is relative, and unpredictability is ultimate. Second — when the individual is not satisfied with the successful adjustment and strives for more beyond any necessity.

Existential psychology gives an adequate account of the human being as a self-determined being and thus complements traditional psychology which deals with the human being as a determined being. Thus, existential psychology may be treated as the psychology of self-determination, which

becomes possible as soon as we start to mediate our behaviour by our consciousness (Vygotsky, 1983), by symbolization, imagination and judgement (Maddi, 1971), by our relations to the life-world at large. Self-determination is a special level of human functioning, qualitatively distinct from the level of determined functioning. The social mission of existential psychology is to encourage and to help people to live at this enriching, though strenuous level, rather than at the level of *diminished humanness* (Maslow, 1976), or *escape from freedom* (Fromm, 1941).

That is why existential psychology is becoming more and more relevant to present-day challenges. People must learn again to live in the unstable, unpredictable world, without much conditioning, guidelines, and warranties, inviting us to take the risk and to experience our mistakes and faults as well as our victories and awards. There is no inherent tragic element in the existential world view except for the awareness that the world is fragile. Too much does not depend on us, and too much does, but we can never know which of our efforts will bear fruit. Existential psychology is to give people the courage to take responsibility to act without being sure.

Certainly, the field of existential psychology overlaps with the fields of humanistic psychology and positive psychology, but does not coincide with them. The relationship between them is a special problem that deserves a special discussion, probably a special journal issue. Humanistic and positive psychologies show us the ideals, the meaningful goals and perspectives for which to strive. Existential psychology sweeps away the illusions of self-sustained “growth” and prepares us for the long hard way with plenty of dangers and seductions. Now it’s up to us. As always.

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