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Existentialism, Humanism and Psychotherapy

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Abstract

Authors of American psychology textbooks habitually refer to the “existential-humanistic” or “humanistic-existential” approach to treatment, while therapists in the UK and Europe say that this usage is inaccurate, and that the differences between the existential and humanistic approaches outweigh their similarities. To assess the merit of these competing claims, we must distinguish between literary and philosophical humanism, which is European in origin, and humanistic psychology, which is a recent American innovation. Having carefully discriminated between the two, it transpires that the similarities between the two approaches are often greater than Europeans concede, but also less than many Americans imagine. The fact that existential psychotherapy in Europe precedes American humanistic psychology by more than two decades entitles existential psychotherapists outside the USA to insist on the uniqueness and specificity of their approach.

Consult almost any textbook on Abnormal Psychology in the United States and you will discover that existential psychotherapy and humanistic psychology are viewed as kindred approaches to treatment here. Under the heading of “Models of Mental Disorder”, often in the first few chapters, one generally finds the “humanistic-existential” or “existential-humanistic” model discussed alongside of the cognitive, behavioral psychodynamic and sociocultural approaches. Meanwhile, in the UK and Europe, the existential and humanistic approaches are considered very different, the former originating on European soil, the latter being a recent American import regarded warily at best (e.g. Spinelli, 1989). The recent debate between John Rowan and Ernesto Spinelli in *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology* (Schneider, K., Bugenthal, J. & Pierson, J.F., eds. 2001) indicates just how deep and convoluted these disagreements have become. While Rowan is eager to deny any fundamental differences, arguing that “we should talk all the time about existential-humanistic psychotherapy” (p. 448), Spinelli replies that American psychologists are profoundly mistaken, and that we must make clear conceptual distinctions between the existential and humanistic approaches to psychotherapy.

Some would argue that this spirited disagreement only concerns a handful of psychotherapy practitioners. But beyond that, everyone who reads, writes or

uses Abnormal Psychology textbooks for instructional purposes and is sensitive to issues of cultural difference has a stake in this discussion too. Why? Because if Rowan is right, we North Americans are justified in speaking of an “existential-humanistic” approach to therapy, and should continue to do so in future. But if Spinelli is right, “existential-humanistic psychotherapy” is really an American hybrid with no counterparts elsewhere around the world. If that is so, in the interests of accuracy, we must expunge the term from our textbooks, or confine such usage to the description of American psychology alone.

Before we tackle these issues directly, it is instructive to note that there are good *historical* reasons for these divergent cultural perspectives. And as a result there is a lot of confusion abroad about the exact meaning of terms like “existentialism”, “humanism” and “humanistic psychology”, and the areas of convergence, overlap and/or dissimilarity between them. This confusion is intensified by the fact that some psychologists in America used one term to modify the other for descriptive purposes. Thus, in the 1950’s, for example, Erich Fromm used the phrase “existential humanism” to characterize his particular orientation (Fromm, 1955; Burston 1991), while Hazel Barnes referred to the “humanistic existentialism” of Jean-Paul Sartre, among others (Barnes, 1959). And following in the footsteps of Rollo May, (an analysand of Fromm’s, as well as a pupil of Paul Tillich, incidentally), James Bugenthal, first President of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, authored an influential book entitled *Psychotherapy and Process: The Fundamentals of An Existential-Humanistic Approach* in 1978.

Unfortunately, terms like “humanism” and “existentialism” often acquire culturally and historically specific meanings for those who use them, so that perfect clarity or unanimity with respect to their “real” meaning could remain elusive. Nevertheless, the effort to clarify what these terms have meant historically is valuable, because it illumines what these words mean to individual practitioners, and why. Which brings us to our first question, namely; what *is* existentialism?

Basically, existentialism is an approach to philosophy and psychotherapy which says that our disparate social and historical situations, differences in age, gender, ability and so on, all of us, by virtue of being human, and conscious of our inevitable death, partake of the same basic structures of existence, and a need to confer value and to impart meaning to life through action and decision. The way in which existence is structured into different *modes* or structures of possibility -- i.e. authentic and inauthentic *modes of being* (Kierkegaard, Heidegger); the “being” and “having” *modes* (Marcel, Fromm); being “in itself”, “for itself” and “for others”, (Hegel, Sartre); or various *modes of relatedness to others* (Buber, Binswanger, Fromm) -- varies significantly from one theorist to

another. But the underlying premises about the human condition, and the pervasive threats to human dignity, autonomy and solidarity with others are often strikingly similar. So despite a plurality of approaches and ideas here, it is possible to discern a kind of *meta-theoretical consensus* about certain fundamentals that place existentialist psychotherapists in the same universe of discourse (Burston, 2000, chapter 2).

When did existentialism begin? That is more difficult to answer. Though Jaspers and Heidegger were already talking about a philosophy of *existenz* during World War I, the term “existentialism” was actually coined later, by a French journalist who was interviewing Sartre in 1941. Sartre liked the label, which gained popularity, and by the end of World War II, was being applied to a wide range of thinkers, not all of whom welcomed this *avant garde* designation. Theologians Paul Tillich and Gabriel Marcel embraced it enthusiastically. But Martin Buber acknowledged his affinities with others who bore this label quite reluctantly, and always emphasized the uniqueness of his own point particular of view. And strangest of all, perhaps, Martin Heidegger rejected the label completely, though his name and ideas figure prominently in every anthology or historical overview of existential philosophy and psychotherapy.

So existentialism is no stranger to mystery or paradox. On the contrary, it makes a generous allowance for their presence in human affairs, and has to, to make some sense of its own murky origins. For confusion about who is (or is not) an existentialist deepened, rather than dissipated, as the 20th century wore on. The term “existentialism” grew even more popular during the fifties and sixties, as Sartre and de Beauvoir’s novels and plays enthralled audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Because of their prodigious literary efforts, other literary figures, including Dostoyevsky, Baudelaire, Kafka, Gide and Rilke were soon embraced by members of the movement as forerunners or fellow travelers. So on reflection, there has never been a stable or binding consensus regarding the leadership or the terms of membership in the existentialist movement, nor precisely when it took root historically.

To trace the existential lineage as far back as possible, we could follow Paul Tillich and Rollo May, and begin with Blais Pascal, whom I call a *proto-existentialist*. For the sake of clarity and convenience, I will defer to the prevailing consensus, and date the origins of existentialism to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. But that raises the question: why do we customarily begin with them?

To get this matter into historical perspective, remember that in medieval times, philosophy was considered the handmaiden of theology, and only emancipated herself from her subservient role through long and strenuous effort. Initially, the growth of the natural sciences contributed to her growing autonomy. After all, by the mid- 19th century, the astounding growth of the

natural sciences had shattered what little was left of the old scholastic synthesis, and promised to confer many moral and material blessings on believers in the new cult of “Progress”.

Unfortunately, by this time, however, philosophy’s erstwhile ally was threatening to turn into a new oppressor, as positivists proposed that philosophy had been freed from fealty to theology to assume her *true* historic mission, which was to be a handmaiden to the natural sciences. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were two notable thinkers who refused positivism’s stifling embrace, and argued that the real goals of philosophy, namely, self knowledge and freedom, are not to be found on this path, and that the apparent gains afforded by modern science and “progress” generally mask alarming trends toward conformity, banality and other deformations of the human spirit.

By the late twenties and early thirties, European psychiatrists who were inspired by existentialism started to create a new approach to the study and treatment of mental disorder called *Daseinsanalysis*, existential analysis, or existential psychotherapy. Some, like Karl Jaspers, were philosophers-turned-psychiatrists. Others, like Ludwig Binswanger, Medard Boss, Viktor Frankl and R.D.Laing, among others, were erstwhile psychoanalysts who left the Freudian fold because they were dissatisfied with its blind allegiance to the natural scientific account of the mind. It was only after the Second World War, in the late 1950’s, that Rollo May joined with Ernst Angel and Ludwig Binswanger’s remarkable pupil, Henri Ellenberger, to introduce Americans to existential psychiatry in the ground-breaking anthology *Existence*, which became a huge best seller just when humanistic psychology was beginning to take root here (May, R., Angel, E., & Ellenberger, H., 1958).

If existential psychotherapy germinated in Europe during the Weimar period, humanistic psychology took root in the United States in the Cold War era. Though somewhat difficult to define, it can be described as a broad spectrum of approaches to treatment that arose here as a spirited challenge to the rival orthodoxies of Freudian theory, which dominated psychiatry, and behaviorism, which dominated psychology.

In fairness to all concerned, psychoanalysis and behaviorism have since moved on, and have long since ceded their hegemonic control of the mental health professions in the USA to cognitivism and psychopharmacology. But to its credit, at its inception, humanistic psychology reproached both psychoanalysis and behaviorism with 1) excessively mechanistic and deterministic accounts of the origins and meaning of human behavior, and 2) with doctrinal rigidity and narrowness, and tendencies toward reification, de-personalization, intellectualization and excessive ritualism in the therapeutic encounter between clinicians and patients. And in this, of course, they resembled their existentialist counterparts considerably.

However, despite the convergent tone of their critiques, one striking difference between the two groups was that existential therapists, for the most part, were psychiatrists, while their humanistic counterparts in America were mostly psychologists. Rollo May tried to bridge this gap by founding the *Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* in 1959, and was partially successful, for a time. Another difference, which was related to the former one, was that the anti-Freudian rhetoric that prevailed among humanistic psychologists in the sixties and seventies was considered quite excessive by many Europeans, even among those who cherished profound reservations about Freud's theory and therapy.

Judging from recent transatlantic debates, however, this venerable bone of contention has lost all of its former urgency. Other issues have taken precedence, such as the status of the "real" self, the notion of "self-actualization", the pursuit of wholeness, congruence, and so on. But let us be frank. Despite these (and other) differences which Spinelli, in particular, lays so much emphasis on (e.g. Spinelli, 1989), the fact remains that existential analysis and humanistic psychology do have much in common. Consider their approaches to symptom removal. The medical model and behaviorist approaches regard a symptom of "mental disorder" as a form of needless suffering that should be mitigated or removed as quickly and as painlessly as possible. While the patient's co-operation is necessary, of course, the technical procedures involved here depend primarily on the knowledge and the agency of the therapist/expert.

From the existential and humanistic standpoints, by contrast, the suffering caused by a patient's "symptomatology" represents an occasion, and indeed, an opportunity, for "soul searching" and earnest reflection in what must soon become a collaborative search or struggle to elucidate and restore a measure of meaning that was somehow lost or obscured in the person's struggle to adapt to adverse circumstances. Though not couched in a religious idiom, of course, this means that suffering may have a "redemptive" function, pointing the person toward a more authentic, integrated existence, rather than being a mere nuisance to be eliminated so he (or she) can get on with the *real* business of living. If anything, in fact, from both the existential and humanistic perspective, the reverse is usually true, since it is our (deliberate or inadvertent) neglect of "the real business of living" that the symptom calls attention to in the first place! Furthermore, as regards treatment, while the therapist's training and experience are crucial to the therapeutic encounter, the patient's agency and/or willingness to enter into a genuine dialogue with the therapist are of equal or greater importance in the long run. Their willingness to take responsibility for their own lives, ultimately, is also key.

Second, note that existential psychotherapy and humanistic psychology share a core conviction that they bring to bear on psychotherapy practice,

namely, the role of self-authorship or self-determination in the formation of our character and conduct. According to this view, we are never entirely determined by our past experiences. Personal choice plays a significant role in who we are and what we become. But contrary to popular imagination, this is not a *new* idea - something that Sartre or Maslow dreamt up one fine sunny day somewhere in the middle of the twentieth century. Aristotle addressed this issue in the *Nichomachean Ethics* in the fourth century BC. And almost two thousand years later, in an "Oration On the Dignity of Man", delivered in 1487, Pico Della Mirandola said that the distinctive attribute of our species -- which separates us from animals, on the one hand, and angels, on the other -- is that we are endowed with both animal and angelic propensities, but are free to *choose* whether we embrace and affirm our bestial or angelic natures (Mirandola, 1965). By contrast with humans, presumably, animals and angels lack this dual nature and the corresponding freedom to choose. They simply are what they are. According to existentialists and humanists then, heredity and environment, instinct and adaptation play important roles in shaping character and conduct, but they do not necessarily *determine* what we are or who we become.

Finally, another similarity between existential analysis and humanistic psychology is that to varying degrees, and in different ways, they both draw on an older, European tradition of literary and philosophical humanism. The humanist outlook is sometimes associated with the Stoic philosopher Terence, whose motto was "Homo sum; nihil humani me alienum puto", or "I am a man; nothing human is alien to me". The broad implication of this remark is that Terence refused to identify with one particular ethnic group. On the contrary, he regarded himself as what the Stoics called a *cosmopolites* – a citizen of the universe, and not the representative of a particular race, nation or religious orientation. In short, Terence embraced a *pan-human* identity that transcends the vagaries of ethnicity and religious belief.

During the Renaissance, the term "humanism" was associated with the revival of pagan learning by the likes of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, who stressed 1) the need for well-rounded people to study "the humanities", and 2) the essential compatibility between neo-Stoic and neo-Platonic philosophy and the Christian faith. Later, the term "humanism" was used to describe the sensibilities of non-dogmatic Christians like Petrarch and Erasmus, who felt that Christianity is as germane to the problems of living in *this* world as it is to seeking salvation in the next.

Later still, the term "humanism" was attached to the work of historians like Giambattista Vico and Jacob Burkhardt, who resisted the positivist program for the human sciences, and looked back at the Renaissance as a period particularly worthy of veneration. But by the mid 19th century, it was also adopted by left-wing Hegelians like Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx.

Following in the Enlightenment tradition, they used the term “humanism” to describe an explicitly *atheistic* outlook that explains belief in the supernatural and longings for transcendence as the result of the (unconscious) projection of the “human essence” into an otherworldly realm, which is conjured up by the faithful as a consolation for (and the legitimation of) an unjust social order that constrains or deforms our latent sociability and capacity to reason. Unlike Burkhardt and others, whose humanism was centered on the study or emulation of the past, Feuerbach and Marx made the realization of humanism a task for the future. Marx summed this up nicely when he said that we are still caught up in the era of human *prehistory*. By this reckoning, real human history has yet to begin, and will not commence until exploitation, oppression and the ideologies that serve to justify or disguise them all cease to exist.

In the 20th century, the term humanism usually denoted a resolute refusal to ground ethics in any supernatural or transcendental framework, coupled with an optimistic faith in the ability of science to illumine and improve our collective lot. Thus, for example, at mid century, Julian Huxley spoke in useful and illuminating ways of “evolutionary humanism”. Unfortunately, during the 20th century (and to this day) some of the more facile, unreflective forms this brand of humanism takes on verge on sheer scientism – an uncritical reliance on science to provide solutions to existential problems. Humanism of this skeptical and/or ethical persuasion is simply an extension of old-fashioned Enlightenment rationalism, and despite obvious points of similarity, is quite wary of Marxism, which it regards as a kind of a secular religion.

In any case, the preceding reflections make it crystal clear that no one *owns* the term “humanism”, and with it, the right to prescribe how it ought to be used, or what it ought to mean. Judging from history, humanism may be religious or irreligious, contemplative or activist, forward or backward looking. But that does not mean that the term itself is so fraught with ambiguity that it is meaningless, even in our ostensibly *posthuman* era. There is a lucid, intelligible core to humanism that informs all of its diverse manifestations. For whatever form it takes, humanism emphasizes the fundamental unity of the human species, and our duty to defend and promote human dignity and welfare in *our* time, rather than in kingdom come. And despite the astonishing amount of anti-humanist rhetoric we’ve endured from the *avant garde* lately, I fail to see why we should abandon or even question these values. On the contrary, now more than ever, we should embrace and defend them.

Having said that, however, it is also imperative that, as scholars and as psychologists, we learn to differentiate clearly between “humanism” as a philosophical outlook and “humanistic psychology”. The former began as a movement *within* Christianity that fostered the revival of pagan learning, and the ongoing cultivation of a tradition of multilingual, bookish reflection on history

and the human condition that stretches backwards to Herodotus and the Bible , and forwards to politically engaged (post-Christian) intellectuals like George Orwell and Albert Camus, and to exemplary scholars like Lewis Mumford or Northrop Frye, who were equally well versed in the wisdom of Christian and pre-Christian (and/or non-Christian) civilizations. By contrast, humanistic psychology began as a specifically American response to a specifically American situation – the dominance of behaviorism and psychoanalysis over the mental health field in the Cold War era. And while it has changed and developed considerably since its inception, no doubt, the relationship of humanistic psychology to the older, European humanism has been problematic, and possibly quite tenuous at times. Indeed, to existentialist critics , it often seemed that humanistic psychology focused so much on experiential processes in the here and now that it treated philosophy, not as a parent discipline, or as a basis for rigorous reflection, as existentialists do habitually, but as a kind of afterthought, or a resource-pool of intriguing ideas that can be invoked or ignored at the theorist’s convenience.

While focusing on the inter-experiential flow between therapist and patient can be extremely useful, and extremely powerful, therapeutically speaking , an exclusive focus on this kind of therapeutic virtuosity can also foster a kind of thoughtlessness and a strident anti-intellectualism that is completely at odds with the bookish and cultivated sensibilities that people *used* to call “humanist”. And it was from this humanist – rather than “humanistic”- perspective that the inimitable Sigmund Koch lashed out against the “human potential” and “sensitivity training” movements spawned by humanistic psychology in the 1960’s. In his estimation, this movement

“ . . . is adept at the image-making maneuver of evading human reality in the very process of seeking to discover and enhance it. It seeks to court spontaneity and authenticity by artifice; to combat instrumentalism instrumentally; to provide access to experience by reducing it to a packaged commodity; to liberate individuality by group shaping. Within the lexicon of its concepts and methods, openness becomes transparency; love, caring and sharing become a barter of “reinforcements or perhaps mutual ego-titillation; aesthetic receptivity or immediacy becomes “sensory awareness”. It can provide only a grotesque simulacrum of every noble quality it courts. (Koch, 1971, pp.315-316).

While some cringe at the severity of this sweeping dismissal, most of my experiences with groups of this kind in the seventies were quite consistent with this description. There was a pervasive anti-intellectualism about them , and a deep seated suspicion of any attempt to preserve one’s dignity through reserve

or mere silence, responses to group pressure which are understood and respected instinctively by Europeans. Fortunately, humanistic psychology has evolved considerably since then, acquiring much more philosophical sophistication. And in all fairness, humanistic psychologists have been quite receptive to the ideas and publications of existential and phenomenological thinkers and therapists in North America, providing them with attentive, sympathetic audiences while the rest of the profession generally tuned them out.

So, how can we best describe the differences between humanistic psychologists and existential psychotherapists? Despite some noteworthy exceptions here and there, existentialists are humanists in the older, European sense of the word more often than humanistic psychologists are, as a rule, because they tend to ground their approach in a firm and fluent grasp of specific texts, and of specific themes and thinkers that precede them. They don't minimize or ignore the importance of openness to experience or authentic self-disclosure, but they don't make a fetish of them either. Moreover, existentialists tend to possess a clearer recognition of human limits and a tragic sense of life that is typically European, and which qualifies their emphasis on self-authorship and/or self-actualization with reminders of the inevitability of suffering and death, and the elements of mystery and paradox that suffuse every human life.

That being so, it appears that John Rowan is right to claim that a Venn diagram depicting the relationship between existential and humanistic psychotherapy *would* show a considerable degree of overlap between the two orientations. But in fairness to Spinelli et al., that statement is chiefly true with respect to the United States. Why? Because beginning with Rollo May, a pupil of Tillich, an admirer of Buber's, and a founding member of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, there have been many theorists and therapists here who wear both these "hats" quite comfortably – James Bugenthal, Eugene Gendlin, Thomas Greening, Alvin Mahrer, Ilene Serlin and Kirk Schneider, among others. And conversely, as Rowan rightly insists, there are many existential psychotherapists here and abroad who, whether they care to acknowledge it or not, are indebted to humanistic psychology for specific "techniques" or clinical interventions of one sort or another.

Having said that, however, Rowan is thoroughly mistaken when he claims that "humanistic psychotherapy, in all its variants, is the real home of existentialism as a praxis" (p. 446). And when he goes on to claim that "Existential analysis, on the other hand, is a heresy, a cult or a sideshow by comparison" with humanistic psychology, he exceeds the bounds of courtesy as well as common sense. The historical record flatly contradicts these assertions which, as it happens, illustrate my own thesis about the profoundly *a-historical* character of humanistic psychology's approach to the theory and practice of

psychotherapy. Rowan reveals his impoverished historical perspective clearly when he speculates that the reason existential and humanistic psychotherapy “became separate” was probably that “existential writers saw the excesses of humanistic psychology during the 1960’s and early 1970’s and did not want to be tarred with the same brush” (p. 448). In truth, like Sigmund Koch, many existentialists did take their distance from humanistic psychology in the sixties and seventies, and Rowan’s “explanation” for the alleged factionalism of Spinelli et al. might be valid if the history of psychotherapy began in the sixties. (Perhaps it did, for Rowan personally!) However, the fact remains that that existential psychotherapy, in one form or another, precedes humanistic psychology by at least two decades in Europe. So it was never a question of these two orientations “becoming separate” at some unspecified historical juncture. They were separate to begin with, and for a variety of historical reasons, were only blended here in the United States.

That being so, should we cease speaking (or writing) of an “existential-humanistic” orientation in deference to Spinelli and his colleagues? Obviously not, if we are speaking about local and/or national trends or perspectives. But if we are addressing global trends in the world of psychotherapy, we should always qualify this usage by emphasizing its reference to American psychology. If this seems unnecessarily cumbersome, or prompts the accusation that in so doing, we are pandering to unrealistic expectations or unjustified demands, remember that our failure to do so will feed fears among psychologists internationally regarding our ostensibly colonialist tendency to “Americanize” psychology, and to negate the Otherness and specificity of divergent cultural perspectives. Unless these fears are grounded in fact, this is something that *any* humanist with some sense of history and a modicum of tact will strenuously try to avoid.

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