

## ***Brave New Worlding***

A response to: *Practising Existential Psychotherapy: the Relational World*

by Ernesto Spinelli, pp. 216, 2007 London: Sage.

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### *Abstract*

This paper is an appreciation and a critical examination of Spinelli's book *Practising Existential Psychotherapy: The Relational World*. It uses the points raised by the author to question the validity of the current emphasis therapy culture places on *relatedness* – and its subsequent avoidance of existential aloneness - and proposes that 'relatedness' is Platonic nostalgia of unity as well as a pragmatist misreading of the wider notions – derived from Zen philosophy and from Nietzsche - of interdependence and groundlessness. It also discusses the other two tenets proposed by Spinelli, i.e. anxiety and uncertainty and the way these reflect on the problem of nihilism, evaded by the current therapy zeitgeist.

### *Key Words*

Interdependence; non-dialectical dialogue; existential aloneness; alterity;

## **A River Runs Through It**

*And but for the sky there are no fences facin'.*

(Bob Dylan)

Franz Rosenzweig (1921/1999:) equated ideas, opinions and concepts - the whole display of what makes up a person's point of view - to a bowl filled with stream water, which the observer takes home to gaze at in "undisturbed wonder". It is impossible to dam the river, Rosenzweig cautions; it is futile to try to comprehend the startling poetry of experience; to believe that in gazing at the water in a bowl we are gazing at the river itself is a form of delusion. Unlike Heidegger, who barricaded himself within the four walls of a self-created notion of 'being', Rosenzweig proffers a thorough, unapologetic critique of ontology: "The stream of life - he disputes in 1921 - has been replaced by something submissive – statuesque, subjugated" (Rosenzweig, 1921, 40-1)

The graceful metaphor of the river and the bowl favours experience against the excesses of presumed knowledge and the imaginary superiority of metaphysics; it endorses becoming and demotes being. Rosenzweig's thought echoes the speculative arguments of a stream of thought which has miraculously survived the tyranny of logos, the intemperance of reason, the stultifying ubiquity of metaphysics; a stream that brought together a handful of mutineers across the ages under the precarious aegis of Heraclitus, who was the first great philosopher and psychologist to apprehend living-and-dying as *river*.

These philosophical insurrectionists have been nibbling away diligently, century after century, at the core of western thought, at its delusions and deceptions, at its magniloquence and manipulations. Conventional philosophy

and theology, from Plato to Heidegger, from Thomas Aquinas to Tillich, have unashamedly favoured being over becoming, transcendence over immanence, system-building over lyrical fragmentation, *logos* over *melos*. In response, heretical western thought – often inspired by philosophies and contemplative practices of the East and Far East - has spiritedly enunciated the very opposite. Not inability, but their own gritty sense of integrity has kept them from the compulsion of system-building. Time and again they adhered instead to fragmentation, the non-dialectical, to impermanence and the ephemeral brilliance of the instant.

Who are these people? I am reluctant to namedrop, and I do not wish to grass on them either. What's more, I do not entirely agree with their stance. I concur instead with the central hypothesis of Spinelli's latest book on the practice of existential psychotherapy: that there *is* a link, and a significant one, between being and becoming, between the structured, 'particle-like' world we create for ourselves - perhaps in order to survive, or create a semblance of safety and meaning (what Spinelli calls *worldview*) - and the fluidity of 'wave-like', experiential interdependence (what he calls *worlding*).

### **As a Box and its Lid**

"[I]t is essential to understand – Spinelli writes – that even this 'split', structural point of focus *remains an expression of worlding*...it is only through worlding that appearance and structure can emerge" (p. 19, my emphasis).

There *is*, after all, a link between the water in the bowl and the flowing river. There *is* continuity between the everyday and the uncanny, between self-

styled authenticity and alleged in-authenticity. There is continuity between what the Zen tradition calls the “relative” and the “absolute” realms.

In *The Identity of Relative and Absolute*, a key text in Zen, the crucial and paradoxical unity between these two spheres is affirmed with clarity and precision. One verse reads:

*Ordinary life fits the absolute as a box and its lid.*

*The absolute works together with the relative,*

*Like two arrows meeting in mid air.*

My own limited and un-awakened mind fails to perceive the hidden harmony of these two realms. Still, this very mind is an integral part of the whole, or, as Master Hakuin puts it, *this very mind is the Buddha*. This point is crucial in Zen practice, and possibly to the practice of existential psychotherapy as well: sole adherence to the absolute, a “belief in emptiness” is an incurable disease, it is a spindrift gaze to heaven, the primary cause of the holy-moly demeanour sadly found in so many self-proclaimed Buddhists. Likewise, the desire to plunge into the river of experience presents us with considerable hazards: dissolution of the personality’s structure, romantic dissipation or worse, the profitable lunacy of basking lavishly in polished litter, between a trip to the shopping mall and a reality TV dinner.

In the second verse of the Heart Sutra the Buddha addresses Shariputra as follows:

*Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness;*

*Emptiness does not differ from form.*

*Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form.*

Recognising the link between structure and process, between *worlding* and *worldview* is akin to the Buddha's teaching of *emptiness is form*, to the suggestion that there is no such thing as a separate, reified 'river of reality'. We could add: there is no nirvana, no liberation apart from living-and-dying; no "fully functioning human being" (Rogers, 1951) apart from this imperfect individual - still anxious, uncertain about the future, who still has desires, needs, who feels a sense of lack, and who still finds the gaze of the Angel averted, its lips silent to his entreaties.

At the same time, the worldview held by the self is a construct, an *artifice*. "It is not fixed and static, but only appears to be" (Spinelli, 2007:19). This equates to the second statement found in the Heart Sutra: *form is emptiness*.

It provides us with the antidote to what Adler calls "self-boundedness" (in Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956/1964, p. 138), Buber "encapsulation" (1957, in Hycner p.23), and Buddhism "ignorance". It provides us with a potential remedy against the dangers of hubris and hero-worship, and with a powerful antidote against fundamentalism of any sort (given that fundamentalism – whether Christian, Islamic, or Oxonian/post-Darwinian - is but the fossilization of a worldview).

Acquiring fluidity of movement in the dance between the two spheres of form and emptiness; moving freely between the limitations of the self and the freedom of experience without falling prey to either siren's call – could this be one of the of existential psychotherapy's desired outcomes? Would it be 'evidence-based' enough? Would it enjoy state-sponsorship?

This book can be seen as Spinelli's (structured, necessarily limited) view of an ongoing, ever-growing, process-like concatenation of thoughts, texts, experiences, and events we have decided to call 'existential psychotherapy'. But what is existential psychotherapy? If it's true that "[it] rests upon a number of seminal ideas and conclusions drawn from a philosophical system which has become most generally known as *existential phenomenology*" (Spinelli, 2007: 1), what are its philosophical hypotheses?

Before examining these central theoretical points, I wish to tiptoe round the edges of the 'philosophy of existence', given that my respect for, as well as my mistrust of this philosophical 'system' are inevitably replicated in my reading of Spinelli's book.

No twentieth century philosophical 'school' has looked at the 'human condition' with a more unflinching, uncompromising look. And no school of thought has been more ambiguous in its commitment to emancipation and ethics. Some existential therapists discard Camus and Sartre as 'nihilist thinkers' (Cooper in Sanders 2004), tagging along an esteemed Anglo-Saxon tradition of weeding out radical and too damn pessimist thinkers and annexing instead those whose philosophy is more advantageous to the building of schools and the proliferation of the ever-growing psychotherapy industry. And although hundreds of quotes are lifted from unsuspecting pre-existential nineteenth-century gentlemen such Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, their harsher truths are often glossed over a friendly talk of 'value pluralism' and the like.

## **Killroy was here**

For Spinelli, a central part of therapeutic work – a point he addresses in Part Two of the book - is to investigate and challenge the degree to which our worldview mirrors the wave-like process of experience. So skilful a writer and practitioner is Ernesto Spinelli that one may pick the book at any page, and the key insight of *worlding/worldview* – of fluid experiencing and structured self-concept - will illuminate the book in the way a powerful metaphor holds a matchless poem.

The insight also presents us with an interpretative key to the book itself. Is Spinelli's book Rosenzweig's bowl of water? If so, its accomplishment lies in its humility, in the knowledge that what is depicted here is not the river itself – in this case the ever-changing practice of existential psychotherapy – but the author's own perspective. Part two in particular presents us with a structural model that becomes alive when imaginatively applied by the therapist to a living situation with a client. The author's intention reminded me of what William Faulkner once said about the artist's work:

The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life. Since man is mortal, the only immortality possible is to leave something behind him that is immortal since it will always move. This is the artist's way of scribbling "Killroy was here" on the wall of the final and irrevocable oblivion through which he must someday pass. (Faulkner, 1956)

## **Interdependence: an Overture to the Symphony of Groundlessness**

On an unusually balmy night in February, Spinelli told a crowded gathering in Holborn that he wrote this book with the same exigency with which Bob Dylan had written *A hard rain's a-gonna fall* in 1963 - that is, attempting to condense all that he needed to say at this particular juncture. Dylan's sense of urgency had been induced by the Cuban missile crisis that had reached its peak during the late autumn the previous year. I do not recall whether Spinelli mentioned a particular aspect of our present-day quandary he felt prompted to respond to (take your pick: our times provide a rich display human suffering and human stupidity), apart from the proclaimed need to try and define, without encasing it, what might constitute existential psychotherapy at present.

He identifies three key underlining principles of existential phenomenology: *relatedness, uncertainty, and anxiety*.

I equate the first principle of *relatedness* with the principle of *interdependence* or *co-dependent arising* in Mahayana Buddhism, for the portrayal of relatedness given in the book strongly resembles the Buddhist notion of interdependence.

Interdependence is another word for *relativity*. Simply put, it states that each "thing", whether animate or inanimate, is devoid of substance, of separate autonomous existence and that it exists only in relation to other 'things', within a network of correlations. This echoes the existential phenomenology of Lèvinas (1961), for whom the subject comes into being as summoned by the other. Interdependence also presents us with something a little bit frightening: that there is no such thing as ground of being. Relatedness is, in other words,

an affirmation of *groundlessness*. Being-in-the-world undermines the presumed solidity of the subject. It is in my view an error to identify 'relatedness' or 'interdependence' with inter-subjectivity. To talk of inter-subjectivity, we need to assume that there is a subject in the first place. Moreover, the notion of inter-subjectivity belongs to psychoanalysis and the psychodynamic tradition rather than existential thought.

*Inter-subjectivity* is the way in which western psychotherapy - steeped as it is in Judaeo-Christian values – translates (and in doing so, betrays) groundlessness, by safely inscribing it within 'love of one's neighbour' notions that smooth out the existential edge, the sheer terror that arises when we truly touch upon the insubstantiality of the self. I do not wish to revile the notion of inter-subjectivity, but simply to apprehend it as a human artifice that potentially demotes the deconstructive and liberating power of interdependence, reducing it to the frog-pond realm of dialectical dialogue. In this way, what had started as an unfettered exploration of experience relapses within the confines of Judaeo-Christian values and the subsequent evasion, among other things, of existential *aloneness*. If I may be forgiven a sweeping statement: this is not the book's shortcoming, but a fault intrinsic to existential phenomenology itself.

In introducing its three key underlying principles, Spinelli proposes that the inter-relational stance is "incompatible with contemporary Western culture's abiding embrace of dualism" (p 11). But the very notions of inter-subjectivity and dialogue are steeped in dualism – as well as in pragmatism, in "sophisticated relativism" in the possibility of "socially mediated knowledge"(Downing, p 102). Far from being a generous desire towards

inclusion, we dialogue with another because the inherent dualism of our thinking and being is unbearable to us (Blanchot, 1993).

What Spinelli identifies as “the grounding of relatedness” (p 12) is in my view an overture to the startling symphony of groundlessness, rather than an existential appendix to the currently dominant ‘relational’ and dialogical trend in psychotherapy. To read Spinelli’s ‘first existential principle’ of relatedness as an addendum to the current hurdy-gurdy doctrine that sees in the ‘relationship’ the alpha and the omega of psychotherapeutic theory and practice is doing disservice to this invaluable book. It would be a regression, via Martin Buber’s “I-Thou”, to Kierkegaard’s “Christology”, to the bourgeois daydream of “inclusive dialogue”. Such notions are less harmless than one might think: one of their current, lethal manifestations is liberal interventionism that rates war among the types of dialogue available to humans.

Understanding interdependence in terms of dialogical relationship might be a sign of the times. That it should be reflected in a key text on existential psychotherapy authored by one of its most inspiring practitioners alive today is perhaps a mark of decline, of the weakening of a grand philosophical tradition and its potential abdication to the demands of the obsessively pragmatic zeitgeist.

How truly refreshing, however, to find no mention whatsoever - in a book on the ‘relational world’ - of John Bowlby, given that attachment theory is *the* relational gospel in psychotherapy courses up and down the country. Perhaps this is partly where the crux of the matter lies: in spite of the originality of approach offered by existential psychotherapy, interdependence is in our day

and age largely if not exclusively understood via the 'fundamental child/primary carer dyad.

### **The Accident of Relating and non-dialectical Dialogue**

*Relationship* has become the key word in therapy, and some maintain that psychotherapy has first shifted from the father principle to the maternal realm, and now to that of the siblings, where a fundamental symmetry between self and other is assumed (Holmes, 1995: 1). This so-called 'symmetry' (in therapy as in the world out there) is of course nonsense. Relational depth, inter-subjectivity, co-creation (Mearns & Cooper, 2005; Hycner, 1991): current therapeutic discourse conveys aspirations of equality, empathy, and inclusion. Such aspirations are often based on pragmatism rather than justice, on hermeneutic correctness rather than restorative healing. Anything resembling a 'genuine encounter' occurs as *accident* (Lèvinas, pp. 68-69), or in Rilke's *zwischenraum* "between world and toy", or in the sphere of "non-dialectical dialogue" (Blanchot, 1993). Or indeed at "crisis points" or "in the intensity of their [client and therapist's] meeting" (Spinelli, p 165).

Dialogue is a defective notion: looking closely at its modalities, Maurice Blanchot (1993) found three equally unattractive and detrimental ways in which dialectical dialogue manifests: *objective*, *inter-subjective*, *immediate*. I'll skip the first one – typical of the 'objective', 'scientific', 'I-It' mode and of its fixed dichotomy between subject and object – and look at what is pertinent to our enquiry, i.e., the second and third mode. Within the second, *inter-subjective* mode, the other is thankfully no longer perceived by the self as an object but as another self, perhaps very different, but with whom the self is

able to connect via some form of primary identity. Key inspirer of this mode, which Spinelli wholeheartedly espouses, is Gadamer, a gifted thinker who nevertheless left the ethical as well as the political dimension out of the dialogical domain, and who ignored the manipulative influence of ideology (Habermas quoted in Downing, 2000). Dialogical unhindered communication is a worthy aspiration, which, however risks ignoring the fundamental *asymmetry* and inequality of any human encounter.

The third dialectical mode of dialogical encounter is the so-called *immediacy*, where self and other lose themselves, merge, and forget distance. Intensity, “authenticity”, and loss of self become key elements. The otherness of the other is lost in this merging, which becomes effectively a form of spiritual or even existential bypass. There are indeed many therapists practicing today who confuse the practice of counselling and psychotherapy with a self-styled ‘spirituality’. Here the uniqueness of the other is sacrificed at various altars: the mystique of new age mumbo-jumbo, the prestigious lure of institutionalised religion, as well as the existential fascination with Heidegger’s sinister neutrality of “Being”. This is also a mode that sanctifies the authenticity and spontaneity of that other undisputed quasi-mystical platitude of our times, the “present moment” (Stern, 2004) and nearly succeeds in ‘re-mystifying’ therapy.

All three dialectical approaches, different on the surface, have in common a profound nostalgia for *unity*, as well as a compulsion towards unity. All three dialogical modes fall short of honouring the alterity of the other. Objective analyst, inter-subjective/experiential practitioner and empathic spiritualist: all aim at reducing the unease that comes when facing the otherness of the

client; all fall short of honouring the irreducible aloneness and alterity of the other.

### **Between Pragmatism and Nihilism**

The second principle of existential phenomenology identified by Spinelli is existential *uncertainty*. Unique among contemporary approaches that deal with human suffering and unease, existential psychotherapy fully recognises the fundamental uncertainty of life, its impermanent and unsatisfactory nature. What is instructive about the way uncertainty is discussed here is the fact that, as the author boldly states, “...worlding, in its uncertainty, is always surprising”(p 24). The less obvious aspect of ontological uncertainty is, Spinelli aptly suggest, that we can treat ‘the ‘expected’ as “novel”, “full of previously unforeseen qualities and possibilities” (ibid). This is a long way from the placebo treatments of state-sponsored therapy and it carries the adventurous scent of the best existential tradition, with its emphasis on the dignity and resources of human beings. It comes as a surprise, therefore, that the author should quote in support of his thesis thinkers such as Isaiah Berlin –the sharpest apostle of bourgeois liberalism– and neo-Hobbesian John Gray, popular purveyor of prophesising cynicism for the befuddled.

Berlin’s ‘value pluralism’ quoted by Spinelli in his elucidation of existential uncertainty is only one step away from Richard Rorty’s pragmatism. This is no doubt a tolerant and compassionate approach to the unfixed nature of human relating *within* the vision of symmetry. It is heartening, and provides us with some form of certainty. Personally, I believe that value pluralism is an avoidance of the crucial problem of nihilism. Briefly: if Nietzsche’s hypothesis

was correct, then there is no way *around* nihilism – we must go all the way to the very end of the proverbial tunnel, and fully embrace uncertainty, doubt, the groundlessness of existence. Anything less is but a shadow of God, nostalgia for religion and theistic consolation.

Spinelli's receptivity to Rollo May's fertile notion of the daimonic, as well as to dream work opens up its existential phenomenological enquiry outside the customary confines of this mode of thought. On the other hand, his embracing of Daniel Stern's notions of inter-subjectivity and the glorification of the immediacy of the present moment suggest oblique agreement with current orthodoxy. As one inspired by the development of the work of an artist, I'm intrigued to see 'what Ernesto will do next'. The inter-subjective mode paves the way to a non-committal pragmatist stance that in my view is a betrayal of *epochè's* strategic passivity – a stance that after Sartre is no longer viable without its built-in link to ethical responsibility and political commitment. Incidentally, how heartening to see Sartre praised here, and how courageously untimely a tribute to a thinker who most Anglo-Saxon thinkers love to hate.

The pragmatist-dialogical approach might be the only avenue left for those practitioners of existential psychotherapy who are unwilling or unable to confront the problem of nihilism. Sympathy for the daimonic, flirtation with the dream world, therapeutic liaisons with the unpredictability of intimacy and the mystery of Eros suggest on the other hand a willingness on Spinelli's part to explore areas outside the grey eminence of Heidegger's Almighty Being, and outside the existential- phenomenological box, encased as it is between demystified concreteness and abstract artefacts.

Spinelli acknowledges the “meaninglessness” of worlding (p 39). If Nietzsche’s diagnosis was correct, it might be essential for our culture to confront meaninglessness squarely (Gemes, 2001; Bazzano, 2006). If it’s true that Nietzsche’s work is “primarily directed at overcoming nihilism” (Gemes, 2001, p 14), then its very overcoming surely entails not avoidance of nihilism but meeting it head on.

Could existential psychotherapy be seen as a careful method of exploring gradual levels of de-sedimentation? If it is, then its endeavor is akin what goes on in meditation practice. The Buddha’s word for sedimentations is *skandas*, or deep-seated patterns. Can we afford a middle way between a rigid sedimented structure and a ‘un-hinged’, un-structured relation to being-in-the-world?

### **The Trail is not a Trail**

*The end is now a matter of immanence*

(Frank Kermode)

The third principle described by Spinelli is *anxiety*. Here I must give full credit to existential phenomenology’s uniqueness in accepting our human response to the uncertainty of living and the certainty of death, and in grasping the thoroughly modern sense of a *diffuse* (as opposed to final and salvific) *apocalypse*. This is possible if we understand Spinelli’s worlding as *becoming* (or impermanence) rather than Heidegger’s *being*. The latter is a numinous abstraction that ended up being *identified* (with the being of the ‘great man’) as well as *historicized* (Hitler’s defence of western *Dasein* against the impending threat of America and the Soviets).

Can existential psychotherapy provide an alternative worldview to the current zeitgeist? Can it offer a liberating response to human discomfort and dejection? Boxed as we are between the ornate musings of say, an Adam Phillips and the mass-produced placebo of CBT, 'experiential practitioners' have nothing to lose. The route is wide open, and Spinelli's book is a compelling invitation to create one's own path. In closing this wonderful and thought-provoking book, I was reminded of a poem by Gary Snyder. I looked it up and wrote it down in its entirety:

*I drove down the Freeway  
And turned off at an exit  
And went along the highway  
Til it came to a sideroad  
Drove up the sideroad  
Til it turned to a dirt road  
Full of bumps, and stopped.  
Walked up a trail  
But the trail got rough  
And it faded away –  
Out in the open,  
Everywhere to go.  
(Snyder 1986)*

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