

## **An existential-phenomenological approach to psychotherapy**

This approach has grown out of a questioning of psychotherapy based on a scientific model, as originally proposed by Freud, and instead, offers one informed by philosophy. Existential philosophy has incorporated some radical and challenging thinkers mainly from a European background, such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Sartre. The work of these philosophers has informed a psychotherapy that clinicians such as Binswanger and Boss, and in more recent times, May, Yalom, Van Duerzen, and Spinelli have developed further.

For me, however, whilst I acknowledge the influence of these eminent thinkers and academicians, I see philosophy as a personal engagement in which we can consider the way we are living, our relationship with others and with our world, and reflect on age old philosophical questions such as ‘who am I?’, ‘why am I here?’, ‘how do I live my life?’, and so on. In reflecting on these questions we place ourselves in a position to evaluate our own meanings, thoughts, emotions, and values. We can also consider what it is to find ourselves in an embodied existence born into a certain time and culture, and where we find ourselves in the world, and how that ties in with notions such as freedom, choice and responsibility.

The emphasis then in existential-phenomenological psychotherapy, as I see it, is on both relationship and context, and our own philosophical perspectives on this, whoever they may be informed by. Thus it is not essential, or even necessarily desirable to be *au fait* with existential philosophy before embarking on an existential-phenomenological psychotherapy. Other influences on our thinking from other philosophical, theological, or other traditions and influences, as well as our everyday experiences, will shape our perceptions on how we are living in the world. Thus philosophy is not just the realm of academicians.

By staying with the phenomena that are presented in a psychotherapeutic session we can draw out meanings, values and perspectives that have shaped our thinking and experience of our living, and even challenge and change these if we so chose. While I do not employ a Freudian approach as such, and instead embrace the philosophical dimension offered by existential –phenomenological psychotherapy, I would not reject all of Freud’s thinking out of hand either. It too is part of the phenomena of the world, and has informed part of my training as a psychotherapist, as have other clinicians and theorists such as Klein and Jung.

However, by not sticking rigidly to the thoughts of any particular academician, clinician or philosopher I believe what is acknowledged is the unique expression of the relationship that develops between two people in this psychotherapeutic meeting. We do not become fixed or dogmatic about our sense of who we are, but instead acknowledge that we are ever changing beings within a dynamic existence.

It is hard to know what to offer as recommended reading since, as I have just emphasised, everyone finds their own way through philosophy and psychotherapy, and I don't suppose many of us are in total agreement with another's perspective. However, one of my personal favourite books for introducing an existential-phenomenological perspective is Hans Cohn's *Existential thought and therapeutic practise*.

Further information on the Society of Existential Analysis, of which I am a member, can be found at [www.existentialanalysis.co.uk](http://www.existentialanalysis.co.uk).

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