

I wrote this essay in my first semester of graduate school for a master's degree in counseling psychology. The assignment was to write about my "Theory of Choice/Philosophy of Human Nature." I retired as a therapist in September 2022, but this still makes a lot of sense to me and will tell you something about how I see things.

Theory of Choice and Philosophy of Human Nature

by Gabi Clayton

The Existential/Phenomenological (E/P) paradigm offers a philosophical frame of reference that meshes well with my own experience and my belief that, as Rollo May said, "There is no such thing as truth or reality for a living human being except as he participates in it, is conscious of it, has some relationship to it."^[1]

Discovering and creating reality is a dynamic lifelong journey. The emphasis in E/P therapy is on immediate experience. The therapist facilitates the unfolding process of the person, as "midwife to the birth of the patient's yet unlived life."^[2] Emphasis is on the present, reaching into the future. The past is not static fact or historical truth, but something created in the present - memories reaching back from the present, memories transformed by the call of the now experiencing person.

One of the basic ideas that attracts me to E/P therapy is that the person and the world co-constitute each other, each emerging from the relationship between the two. They cannot be separated from each other without the loss of something vital.

Having studied art, the relationship between "figure" and "ground" helps me to understand the way this person/world relationship works. An artwork in which figure (subject) and ground (background) are treated as separate parts is disjointed and incomplete. When there is unity, the figure/ground (or person/world) are locked together in a mutually dependent balanced tension.

In a helping relationship, I believe a process E/P psychotherapists call "bracketing," is necessary. Assumptions and biases are clearly laid out, and the therapist attempts to set them aside, not once, but as an ongoing process throughout the course of the therapeutic relationship. It is necessary for the therapist to be able to understand the person/world of the client, to enter into a relationship with the reality of that individual. I think Carl Jung was referring to this same process and how it works for the therapist when he said, "Learn all your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul."

I understand this from my knowledge of the process of making art. A painter starts a new work with some idea, a picture in his or her mind. At some point in the working process, that painter will stop and step back to see the work-in-progress. Now the painting is not what the artist pictured. The artist can try to force it to become that idea, but this is not successful because the painting is made of real paint on real canvas, and has taken on a kind of life of its own. The artist must put aside (bracket) the original idea in order to engage the painting as it is.

The four ultimate concerns that Existential therapy focuses on are: death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness. An E/P therapist will listen for these much in the way an RET therapist listens for a client's irrational beliefs.

Death - We all must deal with the death of those we love or have cared for, and with the realization that we grow older every day, and will die. There is death in the impermanence of all that makes up our world, and in the anxiety we deal with during transitions in life. Out of our knowledge of death comes a search for immortality, through our children, the memories of those who have cared for us, our work, the artworks we leave behind, and our spiritual journeys.

Existential isolation is the unbridgeable aloneness of each human being. Relationship with others: family, friends, community; lessens the separateness, but never completely. There is a need to stay in touch with the self, taking time to experience the I-am.

Freedom. Wonderful, complicated, frightening freedom. Out of that word comes: responsibility, willing, wishing, choice/decision, guilt - all of concern to the therapist. For example, there is the question of where responsibility for our existence is to be placed. The Existential answer (and my own), lies in a tension between two ideas. One idea is that we are responsible for, and the creator of, our individual reality (the absolute idealism of Sartre). The other idea is the belief that human beings are "thrown" into their world, absorbed by a history not of their own choice (the fatalism of Heidegger). The E/P therapist helps the client to "make peace" with and take ownership of the past as a personal reservoir of experience. "Simply to appropriate this set of facts and own it as one's personal history is already liberating."^[3] At the same time, the therapist challenges the client to take responsibility for choices that have been and will be made, helping the person to work through decisional crises, "...responsibly steering a course now toward a future only dimly seen."^[4]

Meaninglessness is the last ultimate concern. From the E/P perspective, meaning in our existence is found in engagement on three levels: Umwelt (translated as world around, the natural/environmental world), Mitwelt ("with-world," the human community), and Eigenwelt ("own-world," the inner, experiencing self).

"Death, freedom, and isolation must be grappled with directly. Yet when it comes to meaninglessness, the effective therapist must help patients to look away from the question: to embrace the solution of engagement rather than to plunge in and through the problem of meaninglessness. The question of meaning in life is as the Buddha taught, not edifying. One must immerse oneself in the river of life and let the question drift away."^[5]

NOTES

[1] Rollo May (ed.), *Existential Psychology*, (Random House, New York, 1969), 14.

[2] Rollo May and Irvin Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, in Raymond J. Corsini and Danny Wedding (eds.), *Current Psychotherapies*, (F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc.; Itasca, Illinois; 1989), 395.

[3] Donald Moss, *Psychotherapy and Human Experience* in Ronald S. Valle and Steen Halling (eds.), *Existential-Phenomenological Perspectives in Psychology*, (Plenum Press, New York, 1989), 205.

[4] Donald Moss (see above).

[5] Irvin Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, (Basic Books, New York, 1980) 11.