

Existential Thought *and* Therapeutic Practice

An Introduction to
Existential Psychotherapy

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Preface

My aim in writing this book is twofold: I wish to present an overall framework for an existential-phenomenological approach to psychotherapy and at the same time show how such a framework affects the day-to-day practice of the therapist. This aim inevitably shapes the structure of the book – it demands an emphasis on certain aspects of the approach while other aspects are unavoidably neglected. A few initial comments on what this book sets out to do and what it regards as beyond its scope seem, therefore, appropriate.

First, throughout the book the existential-phenomenological framework is compared with the assumptions of psychoanalysis as originally proposed by Freud. Though these have, of course, been modified over the years, their basic ideas underlie most forms of psychodynamic therapy. It seemed useful to introduce a new framework by comparing it with one that is more familiar, particularly as the existential approach is in many ways, historically and theoretically, a response to psychoanalysis. Moreover, just as theory and practice are interwoven in psychoanalysis, existential thinking becomes manifest in the therapeutic situation.

Secondly, this is not a history of existential psychotherapy. Like psychoanalysis, existential psychotherapy presents itself in a number of different models. To refer to them all would obscure the purpose of this book.

The model I am introducing is based on the attempts of two Swiss therapists, Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss, to find a new foundation for the practice of psychotherapy in the philosophical concepts of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger had a profound influence on the thinking of a number of European philosophers, particularly on that of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I think it would be fair to say that Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre are the most distinct voices in what became the

philosophical movement called 'existentialism' in Europe. Though their views differed in many ways, they share certain basic philosophical assumptions. It is their ideas that form the basis of what I call existential psychotherapy in this book.

Thirdly, in order to maintain a clear outline of such a new framework, I had to neglect certain interesting and important approaches which introduce variations and modifications, particularly as they often seemed to me to deviate significantly from the basic concepts of the European movement. Such deviations frequently lead to a rather imprecise and almost colloquial use of words like 'existential', 'ontology' and 'authentic' without paying attention to their meaning in the context of existential philosophy.

Thus I find it difficult to discern a consistent philosophical framework in the work of R.D. Laing, and it was probably not his intention to provide one. For example, in his most influential book, *The Divided Self*, he points out in a footnote that he is using the word 'ontological' not in a philosophical sense like Heidegger and Sartre but simply as an adjective derived from 'being'. However, he does not compare his usage with that of the existential philosophers, and he established with 'ontological insecurity' a term that has become very popular with some existential therapists but drifts philosophically in a vacuum. This example may explain why I would find the inclusion of an exposition of Laing's work, interesting and influential though it may be, confusing and misleading.

A few words also need to be said about my reluctant decision not to include the group of American existential therapists who in any history of existential psychotherapy would, of course, occupy a prominent place. Though they are in varying degrees influenced by European developments, they seem to me very deeply rooted in their own philosophical tradition in which humanistic and pragmatist elements play a decisive part. It would take a separate study to do justice to the relation between existential and humanistic aspects of American existential psychotherapy, and this book is not the place for it. It must, however, be stressed that American therapists have made important contributions to many aspects of existential therapy, and that their books have a great deal to offer to anyone interested in this new therapeutic approach.