9.1: Understanding the Philosophy of Existentialism

The roots of existentialism as a philosophy began with the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kierkegaard was intensely interested in man's relationship with God, and its ultimate impossibility. Man is finite and individual, whereas God is infinite and absolute, so the two can never truly meet. In pursuing the relationship, however, man goes through three stages or modes of existence: the aesthetic mode, the ethical mode, and the religious mode. The aesthetic mode is concerned with the here and now, and focuses primarily on pleasure and pain. Young children live primarily in this mode. The ethical mode involves making choices and wrestling with the concept of responsibility. An individual in the ethical mode must choose whether or not to live by a code or according to the rules of society. This submission to rules and codes may prove useful in terms of making life simple, but it is a dead end. In order to break out of this dead end, one must live in the religious mode by making a firm commitment to do so. While this may lead to the recognition that each of us is a unique individual, it also brings with it the realization of our total inadequacy relative to God. As a result, we experience loneliness, anxiety, fear, and dread. All of this anguish, however, allows us to know what is really true, and for Kierkegaard truth was synonymous with faith (in God). However, as important as man's relationship to God was for Kierkegaard, he was adamantly opposed to organized religion. Kierkegaard rejected objective, so-called “truth” in the form of religious dogma in favor of the subjective “truth” that each person “knows” within themselves. While this subjective, personal truth brings with it the responsibility that leads to anxiety, it can also elevate a person to an authentic existence (Breisach, 1962; Frost, 1942).

Another philosopher considered essential to the foundation of existentialism was the enigmatic German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). A key element of Nietzsche’s philosophy is the will-to-power. He believed this will-to-power is the fundamental force in the universe (Alfred Adler considered it fundamental to personality development). Ironically, according to Nietzsche, the universe has no regard for humanity. Natural forces (such as disaster and disease) destroy people, life is extremely difficult, and even those who struggle on attempting to realize their will eventually succumb to death. There is no hope to be found in an afterlife, since Nietzsche is famous for declaring that God is dead! Neither is there much hope within society for many people. Nietzsche believed that inequality was the
natural state of humanity, so he considered slavery to be perfectly understandable and he felt that women (who are physically weaker than men) should never expect the same rights as men. Nonetheless, Nietzsche saw a great future for humanity, in the belief, indeed the faith, that we would create a **superman** (or superwoman, as the case may be). It is the creation of the superman that gives purpose to existence. Although the concept of the superman helped to fuel Nazi views on creating a German master race, it also made its way into American comic books as the great hero Superman (Fritzsche, 2007; Frost, 1942; Jaspers, 1965). In perhaps Nietzsche’s most famous work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the would-be prophet Zarathustra encouraged people to seek a better future for humanity:

*I will teach you about the superman*. Man is something that should be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? (pg. 81, Nietzsche, quoted in Fritzsche, 2007)

The German existentialists Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) focused on human existence itself and our role in the world. In a sense, Heidegger trivialized the nature of God, equating God with little more than the greatest being in the world, but a being nonetheless (just as humans are). Jaspers was not an atheist, but still his existential theory focused on the human journey toward a **freedom** that has meaning only when it reveals itself in union with God (Breisach, 1962; Lescoe, 1974). Heidegger considered individuals as beings who are all connected in **Being**, thus distinguishing between mere beings (including other animals) and the nature of truth or **Being**. Only humans are capable of understanding this connection between all beings, and Heidegger referred to this discovery as **Dasein** (“being here,” or existence). On one level, Dasein is common to all creatures, but the possibility of being aware of one’s connection to **Being** is uniquely human. For those who ask the big questions, Dasein can become authentic existence. This experience comes in the fullness of life, but only if one adopts the mode of existence known as **being-in-the-world**. Heidegger insisted that Dasein and being-in-the-world are equal. Being-in-the-world is an odd concept, however, since Heidegger believed that Being can only arise from nothingness, and so we ourselves arise as **being-thrown-into-this-world**. Having been thrown into this mysterious world we wish to make it our own, but our desire for connection with **Being** leads to anxiety. This anxiety cannot be overcome, because we are aware that we will die! Surprisingly, however, Heidegger considers death to be something positive. It is only because we are going to die that some of us strive to experience **life** fully. If we can accept that death will come, and nothing will follow, we can be true to ourselves and live an authentic life (Breisach, 1962; Lundin, 1979).

Finally we come to the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). Sartre was an extraordinary author and one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964, but chose to reject it. More importantly for us, however, is the fact that he carried existential philosophy directly into psychology, with books such as *The Transcendence of the Ego* (Sartre, 1937/1957) and a section entitled “Existential Psychoanalysis” in his extraordinary work Being and Nothingness (Sartre, 1943). Whereas Kierkegaard believed that man could never truly be one with God, and Heidegger trivialized God, Sartre simply stated that God does not exist. But this is not inconsequential:

The Existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an a priori Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. (pg. 459; Sartre, 1947/1996).

If one looks at the title of Sartre’s most famous philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1943), you might get the impression that Sartre followed in the footsteps of Heidegger. However, Sartre did not agree with Heidegger (see Sartre, 1943). Sartre divided the world into **en-soi** (the in-itself) and **pour-soi** (the for-itself). Pour-soi can be defined as
conscious beings, of which there is only one kind: human beings. Everything else is en-soi, things (including non-human animals) that are silent and dead, and from which come no meaning, they only are (Breisach, 1962). For Sartre, there is no mystery, no Being, tying all of creation together. Man’s consciousness is not a connection to God that can be realized, it is simply a unique characteristic of the human species. The nothingness to which Sartre refers is a shell around the pour-soi, the individual, which separates it from the en-soi. People who try to deny living authentically, those who try to deny the responsibility that comes with being conscious and settle into being nothing more than en-soi will have a shattering experience and be totally destroyed (since there is no Being, as described by Heidegger, beyond the shell surrounding the pour-soi; Breisach, 1962). This establishes critical ethical implications for the individual, since their life will be what they make of it, and nothing more.

Unfortunately, many people do reject their unique consciousness and desire to be en-soi, just letting life happen around them. As the en-soi closes in around them, they begin to experience nausea, forlornness, anxiety, and despair. Herein lays the need for existential psychoanalysis:

Existential psychoanalysis is going to reveal to man the real goal of his pursuit, which is being as a synthetic fusion of the in-itself with the for-itself; existential psychoanalysis is going to acquaint man with his passion…Many men, in fact, know that the goal of their pursuit is being; and … they refrain from appropriating things for their own sake and try to realize the symbolic appropriations of their being-in-itself…existential psychoanalysis…must reveal to the moral agent that he is the being by whom values exist. It is then that his freedom will become conscious of itself… (pg. 797; Sartre, 1943)

Sartre proposed that individuals become conscious, and through that consciousness create the world itself, but also that we are “condemned to despair” and “doomed to failure” when we realize that all human activities are merely equivalent. This philosophical approach leads into Sartre’s criticism of the psychology of his time. Sartre believed that psychologists, and even most philosophers, stopped short of really understanding people:

For most philosophers the ego is an "inhabitant" of consciousness…Others - psychologists for the most part - claim to discover its material presence, as the center of desires and acts, in each moment of our psychic life. We should like to show here that the ego is neither formally nor materially in consciousness: it is outside, in the world. It is a being of the world, like the ego of another. (pg. 31; Sartre, 1937/1957)

So, Sartre believed that an existential psychoanalysis was needed to go beyond the limits of Freudian psychoanalysis. It is not enough, according to Sartre, to stop at describing mere patterns of desires and tendencies (Sartre, 1943). In critiquing the psychoanalytic biography of a famous author named Flaubert, Sartre asked very meaningful questions about this individual's life: why did Flaubert become a writer instead of a painter, why did he come to feel exalted and self-important instead of gloomy, why did his writing emphasize violence, or amorous adventures, etc.? Sartre’s point is a common criticism of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. If most any result can come from an individual’s experiences, then what does psychoanalysis really tell us about anyone? Sartre proposed a deeper form of psychoanalysis:

This comparison allows us to understand better what an existential psychoanalysis must be if it is entitled to exist. It is a method destined to bring to light, in a strictly objective form, the subjective choice by which each living person makes himself a person; that is, makes known to himself what he is. Since what the method seeks is a choice of being at the same time as a being, it must reduce particular behavior patterns to fundamental relations - not of sexuality or of the will-to-power, but of being - which are expressed in this behavior. It is then guided from the start toward a comprehension of
being and must not assign itself any other goal than to discover being and the mode of being of the being confronting this being. It is forbidden to stop before attaining this goal…This psychoanalysis has not yet found its Freud. (pp. 733-734; Sartre; 1943)

Placing Existential Psychology in Context: Height Psychology Goes Deeper Than Depth Psychology

The two theorists highlighted in this chapter were truly extraordinary individuals. Both Viktor Frankl (who coined the term “height psychology”) and Rollo May were well immersed in existential thought and its application to psychology when they faced seemingly certain death. For Frankl, who was imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camps, death was expected. For May, who was confined to a sanitarium with tuberculosis, death was a very real possibility (and indeed many died there). But Frankl and May were intelligent, observant, and thoughtful men. They watched as many died, while some lived, and they sought answers that might explain who was destined for each group. Both men observed that for those who resigned themselves to death, death came soon. But for those who chose to live, they had a real chance to survive despite the terrible conditions in which they existed.

Frankl and May also shared their training in traditional psychoanalysis, and both had studied with Alfred Adler, at least somewhat. However, they found the so-called depth psychology as lacking, since it did not address the true potential for humans to rise above their conditions. In this regard, existential psychologists have typically been viewed as belonging within the humanistic psychology camp. However, both Frankl and May considered humanistic psychology to also be lacking, in that it neglected the true potential for humans to make bad choices, and to harm both themselves and others. So for existential psychologists, the center of their focus is on the immediate existence of the individual, in the context of their relationship to others. It is this seeming paradox, and the drive to resolve it, that provides the motivation and energy for life.

There is also a natural connection between existentialism and Eastern schools of thought, including yoga, Buddhism, and Taoism. Some of the comparisons are so striking that, shortly after discussing Taoism, May wrote “one gets the same shock of similarity in Zen Buddhism” (May, 1983). And so, this chapter should provide an interesting transition to the final section of this text, in which we will examine both Eastern and Western spiritual approaches to making positive choices in one’s life.