

Existential Angst (Excerpt)

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It has been aptly stated that “Any idiot can face a crisis -- It is day to day living that wears you out” (Anton Chekhov, as cited in Van Deurzen, 2009, p. 226). Existentialism tells us that day to day living is so difficult because humans, unlike other animals are acutely aware of their own existence -- we are “compelled to live a life in which [we] reflect upon [our] own life” (Jacobsen, 2007, p. 288). Kierkegaard discerned that, “With every increase in the degree of consciousness, and in proportion to that increase, the intensity of despair increases: the more consciousness, the more intense the despair” (Yalom, 1980, p. 380). For the existentialist, the human condition is inherently painful. “Pain is the source of human engagement with life” (Van Deurzen, p. 229).

In the existentialist view, such pain and despair arise from our confrontation with certain *existential*, or given, aspects of existence. Existentialists classify this pain into categories, which are varyingly referred to as *core conflicts*, *ultimate concerns* (Yalom, 1980) or *life dilemmas* (Jacobsen, 2007, p. 291). Various categories of these conditions have been proposed by different architects of existentialist theory ¹ (Jacobsen, 2007), the most recognized of which is Irvin Yalom’s list of four core conflicts (Jacobsen, p. 289). These conflicts are: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom, p. 8-9).

In the eyes of the existentialist, the unavoidable awareness of our impending death, our omnipresent freedom, our inexorable isolation and our meaningless existence permeates

¹ For example, Medard Boss and Eric Fromm.

our lives and suffuses each of us with an underlying vague sense of angst (Walsh, 2001, p. 610). This paper will explore that feeling, sometimes termed existential angst, or anxiety, by first providing a brief history of existential thought, the nature of existential angst within the framework of Yalom's (1980) four ultimate concerns, highlights of the relevance of these concerns, followed by a personal perspective of the issues illuminated.

History

Existentialism was born primarily out of the 19th Century philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard (Moss, 2001, p. 10). Kierkegaard viewed people as complacent and unwilling to take responsibility for their lives (Moss). Kierkegaard longed for philosophy to “act like a mosquito and sting the complacent individual awake” (p. 10), to direct and experience the course of his or her own life (Moss).

The German philosopher, Frederich Nietzsche, continued in Kierkegaard's tradition, envisioning the *Urbemensch*, or “superman” (Moss, 2001, p. 11), “who would create authentic values (Nietzsche, 1886/1966, 1892/1954). . . . [and] realize to a higher degree the human capacity to create the shape of one's life” (Moss, p. 11). Similarly, Martin Heidegger, also a German philosopher and dominant figure in existential thought (Craig, 2009, p. 293). also called for people to break through their fears and complacency in order to achieve the goal of living, as he termed, *authentically* (Craig, p. 293).

According to Yalom (1980), existentialist psychology developed as the result of European psychiatrists who rejected Freud's,

reductionism (that is, tracing all human behavior to a few basic drives), to his materialism (that is, explaining the higher in terms of the lower), and to his determinism (that is, the

belief that all mental functioning is caused by identifiable factors already in existence) (p. 17).

These *existential analysts* were called such because, in addition to viewing life as a potentially painful and difficult journey, they believed that each patient constructs his or her own “experiential world and that world [as opposed to infancy or early development] is where the clinician should dwell” (p. 17). The European existential tradition emphasizes the tragic nature of the human condition; however, as Craig (2009) notes, “the existentialists are not advocates of despair. Instead, they campaign for a resolute and courageous attitude that is willing to commit to life’s projects *despite* the absurdity” (p. 294). The existentialist position encourages us to face the tragic nature of our existence and our anxiety over death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness in order to lead more fulfilling lives.

Death

According to Yalom (1980), the core conflict relating to death is the “tension between the awareness of the inevitability of death and the wish to continue to be” (p. 8). For Yalom this conflict constitutes “a primordial source of anxiety and, as such, is the primary fount of psychopathology” (p. 29). Death is unique, in that it constitutes the passage from existence to nonexistence. As such, death evokes its own type of angst, which Kierkegaard referred to *dread* (Yalom, p. 43). Fear, he said, is fear of *some* thing, while death anxiety is the dread of *no* thing (p. 43). Thus, death anxiety is the feeling of dread that accompanies the idea of becoming nothing, of being expunged. (p. 43).

Because it is essentially the fear of nothingness, death anxiety is nearly impossible to face. As Yalom (1980) explains, “A fear that can neither be understood nor located cannot be

confronted and becomes more terrible still: it begets a feeling of helplessness which invariably generates further anxiety” (p. 43).

Yalom (1980) posits that humans live in a constant state of alert to impending obliteration; however, we are unaware of it for two reasons: First, the dread of becoming nothing is unconscious. It is, as he describes,

a dread that is part of the fabric of being, that is formed early in life at a time before the development of precise conceptual formulation, a dread that is chilling, uncanny, and inchoate, a dread that exists prior to and outside of language and image (p. 45).

Second, we resist the anxiety “by displacing it from nothing to something” (p. 43).

Combatting a *something* that is identifiable and comprehensible is more emotionally manageable than battling what Rollo May calls “a nothing with which the individual has nothing to do” (Yalom, p. 43). Thus, in the existentialist view, we unknowingly defend against death anxiety by ascribing it to various worldly causes over which we feel we have more control. As Yalom describes,

If we can transform a fear of nothing to a fear of something, we can mount some self-protective campaign - that is, we can either avoid the thing we fear, seek allies against it, develop magical rituals to placate it, or plan a systematic campaign to detoxify it (p. 43).

For example, Yalom (1980) discusses Joyce, a patient who exhibited several symptoms of death anxiety (p. 46). She had been separated from her husband, Jack, for three years, and was involved in a relationship with another man. Yet, during her divorce she found herself unable to stop crying. An analysis of her deep sadness divulged the following: First, even though she did not love Jack, it was of dire importance to her that he continue to love her, think of her often, and consider his love for her the greatest love of his life. When asked why, she responded, “Everyone wishes to be remembered. . . . It’s a way of putting myself

into posterity” (p. 46). Second, she felt that she and Jack had experienced many wonderful things together, and that if they were divorced these events would cease to exist. Finally, she wept for her fear of failure, her fear of being, as she said, “just like everyone else” (p. 47). She had enjoyed much success in her life, and her failed marriage imperiled her “sense of specialness” (p. 47).

According to Yalom (1980), the feelings Joyce described: “the wish to be loved and remembered eternally, the wish to freeze time, the belief in personal invulnerability, the wish to merge with another” (p. 47), and the sense of specialness, were all in place to alleviate her death anxiety. Yalom explains, “Joyce’s husband helped her to freeze time - the future as well as the past. . . . Though she was not conscious of it, it was clear that Joyce was frightened of using up the future” (p. 46). This fear also revealed itself in other behaviors. For example, she had a habit of leaving every task just a bit incomplete: when cleaning the house, she would invariably omit one corner. She could not tolerate the idea of being finished with anything (p. 46).

Yalom (1980) also believes that Joyce’s sense of specialness was a defensive posture that served to mitigate the dysphoria resulting from her awareness of her own isolation, smallness and the “knowledge of death which rumbles unceasingly at the edge of consciousness” (p. 121). Yalom posits that the belief in personal specialness,

enhances courage in that it permits us to encounter danger without being overwhelmed by the threat of personal extinction. . . . The courage thus generated begets what many have called the human being’s *natural* striving for competence, effectance, power and control. To the extent that one attains power, one’s death fear is further assuaged and belief in one’s specialness further reinforced (p. 121).

Thus, Yalom suggests a positive correlation between death anxiety and the belief in personal specialness: As death anxiety increases, so does the maladaptiveness of the response, from simple specialness to compulsive heroism, to workaholism, to narcissism and finally, power mongering (pp. 121-127). However, personal specialness, even in its most potent manifestation, is futile in warding off death anxiety, as Yalom explains:

Absolute power . . . corrupts absolutely; it corrupts because it does not do the trick for the individual. Reality always creeps in - the reality of our helplessness and our mortality; the reality that, despite our reach for the stars, a creaturely fate awaits us (p. 127).

According to Yalom (1980), clients who suffer from strong anxiety related to death generally experience relief through analysis of the issues and discovery of their primary origin. He reports that Joyce improved markedly as a result of addressing her fears and elucidating their common root (p. 47).

Importantly, Yalom (2003) suggests that, “though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death may save us” (p. 127). Confrontations with one’s own death constitutes the most powerful type of *boundary experiences* (p. 127). A *boundary experience* is, “an urgent experience that propels one into a confrontation with one’s existential *situation* in the world (p. 159). It is in this mode that we are most susceptible to personal change (p. 127). Terminal illness is such a boundary experience, and is often a catalyst for overcoming fears and finding meaning in life. Yalom (1980) describes a cancer patient who suffered from disabling interpersonal phobias which seemed to miraculously disappear after her diagnosis (p.160). In explanation of her transformation, “she stated it was a simple process: having faced, and she felt, having conquered her fear of death - a fear that dwarfed all her other fears - she experienced a strong sense of personal mastery” (pp. 160-161). Similarly, the death of a

loved one can release us from fears related to death and, as Yalom (2003) found in a study of bereaved spouses, inspire individuals to “achieve a new level of maturity and wisdom” (p. 128).

Freedom

In existential terms, *freedom* refers to a lack of structure, to “the essential ungroundedness of our existence, values and choices” (Walsh, 2001, p.613). Not only are we the authors of our own lives, but, as existential philosophy tells us, we are also the architects of our own realities. There is neither a guidebook to living, nor a fixed reality to cling to. The sense of *ungroundedness*, or *groundlessness* we are said to feel is the awareness of this two-fold responsibility (Yalom, 1980, p. 221). The existential conflict is thus, “the clash between our confrontation with groundlessness and our wish for ground and structure” (p. 9).

Yalom (1980) points out that, unlike death anxiety, the anxiety of freedom or *groundlessness* is not ubiquitous (p. 222). We have myriad defense mechanisms at our disposal to assuage this fear. Creating or believing in a sense of “structure, authority, grand designs, magic, something that is bigger than oneself” (p. 222), even believing in a reality independent of consciousness is considered a defense against anxiety (p. 222).

In the clinical setting, groundlessness anxiety may present as responsibility avoidance, often manifesting in compulsivity, displacement or denial of responsibility (Yalom, 1980, pp. 223-229). Yalom provides an example of Bernard, a sexually compulsive man, who,

At 5:00 p.m. . . . arrived by plane in a city where he had a professional commitment the following morning. While still at the airport he hurriedly began phoning a series of women acquaintances to arrange for a sexual liaison that evening. No luck! They all had

previous engagements. (Of course, he could easily have phoned them days or, indeed, weeks earlier.) His response was relief: “Thank God, now I can read and get a good night’s sleep, *which is what I really wanted to do all along*” (p. 216).

According to Yalom, Bernard developed his sexual compulsivity (which “forced” him to engage in the behavior) in order to avoid accepting responsibility for cheating on his wife, jeopardizing his job and behaving self-destructively (p. 225).

An additional method of avoiding responsibility is paranoia (Yalom, 1980, p. 227). Paranoia constitutes the displacement of responsibility in which people “disown and attribute to others their own feelings and desires and invariably explain their dysphoria and failures as the result of external influence” (p. 227).

Isolation

Existential isolation is a unique kind of isolation. It is different from *interpersonal* isolation- the general sense of loneliness that stems from a lack of contact with others; and from *intrapersonal* isolation- a fragmentation of the self, which occurs “whenever one stifles one’s own feelings or desires, accepts ‘oughts’ or ‘shoulds’ as one’s own wishes, distrusts own’s own judgment, or buries one’s own potential” (Yalom, 1980, p. 353-354). Rather, *existential* isolation is a two-fold phenomenon: It refers to the awareness of absolute space between the individual and all other individuals, and of the rift between the individual and the world (p. 355). Yalom defines the existential conflict of isolation as, “the tension between our awareness of our absolute isolation and our wish for contact, for protection, our wish to be part of a larger whole” (p. 9).

Existential isolation plays a prominent role in human relationships (Yalom, 1980, p. 362). Throughout our lives we naturally struggle between the need for independence and individuation and the desire to assuage our deep-seated loneliness by seeking the comfort of others. The issue of human relations is commandeered by this struggle between *fusion* and isolation:

On the one hand, one must learn to relate to another without giving way to the desire to slip out of isolation by becoming part of that other. But one must also learn to relate to another without reducing the other to a tool, a defense against isolation (Yalom, p. 362).

In order to palliate intense existential isolation, an individual may avoid confrontation at any cost and become completely submissive in order to preserve the safety of the relationship (Yalom, 1980, p. 378). He or she may also overly-conform to others in thoughts, actions, or clothing and may also exhibit sexual compulsivity, among many other behaviors (p. 381-383).

According to Yalom (1980), existential isolation cannot be diminished (p.363). However, its effects can be mitigated by a particular kind of relationship. This relationship is characterized by what Yalom refers to as *need-less love* (p. 363). Such love is manifest in the *I-Thou* relationship of Buber, the *B-Love* of Maslow, and the *mature* love of Fromm, all of which rest on the premise of a genuine attachment between autonomous individuals (Yalom, pp. 363-372). As Yalom explains, need tends to infect and consume a relationship, contaminating it from the inside as partners use one another for the primary purpose of diminishing their loneliness. He portrays healthy love as a knowing and experiencing of the other completely: For, “if one relates selflessly, one is free to experience all parts of the other rather than the part that serves some utilitarian purpose” (p. 373). However, like all

existential concerns, the only way to achieve the kind of genuine, need-free love with the power to relieve the loneliness that we seek to eclipse, is to develop the strength to tolerate this exact loneliness. As Yalom affirms, “isolation must be experienced before it can be transcended” (p. 398).

Meaninglessness

Existential anxiety over meaninglessness arises because humans are innately meaning-seeking creatures who are stranded in a universe that provides no inherent meaning (Yalom, 1980, p. 9). According to Heery (2001, citing Tillich, 1952 and Camus 1942/1955), “nothing can take this existential anxiety away; we must accept it as part of our existence” (p. 435). Sartre was adamant that the world has no meaning, informing us that, “All existing things are born for no reason, continue through weakness and die by accident” (Yalom, p. 428). For the existentialist, meaning itself must be invented (p. 431).

The existential psychotherapist, Viktor Frankl, posited, that the need for meaning, or what he has termed, the “will-to-meaning,” dominates human motivation (Heery, 2001, p. 435). By this phrase he meant a “deep-seated striving and struggle for a higher and ultimate meaning to his existence” (p. 435). The anxiety we experience due to the absence of inherent meaning is said to motivate us to seek meaning for ourselves (p. 435). As Frankl puts it, the dilemma “is that one is not told by instinct what one *must* do, or any longer by tradition what one *should* do. Nor does one know what one *wants* to do” (Yalom, 1980, p. 450).

Individuals may respond to meaninglessness in various ways: One may deny and repress the feeling and attempt to drown it out with persistent activity (Heery, 2001, p. 435). Such activity may entail accumulating accomplishments, material goods or prestige (Yalom,

1980, p. 453). It may also present as what Salvador Maddi calls *crusadism* (p. 450), which occurs when a person feels compelled to “seek out and dedicate [him or herself] to dramatic and important causes” notwithstanding the purpose (Yalom, p. 450). Alternatively, as Maddi describes, one may act *nihilistic* or *vegetative* (p. 451). The person who responds with nihilism is likely to denigrate the activities that provide others with meaning. One who responds vegetatively presents with apathy and boredom, together with a sense of passive resignation to a meaningless life (p. 451).

According to Tillich (as cited in Heery, 2001), in order to overcome existential meaninglessness, we must summon the courage to take responsibility for our condition and to look deeply within ourselves for direction (p. 436). Yalom (1980) believes there are methods we can apply to our lives in order to acquire meaning. These methods include: acting altruistically, dedicating ourselves to a cause, and exercising creativity (pp. 431-436). Creativity is particularly unique in that it provides meaning as an end in itself: “To create something new, something that rings with novelty or beauty and harmony is a powerful antidote to a sense of meaninglessness. The creation justifies itself, it defies the question What for?, it is ‘its own excuse for being’” (p. 435).

Confronting Existential Angst

In general, confronting existential anxiety is the sine qua non of its conquest. Heidegger implored us to encounter such fears with *resoluteness* - “a readiness to face anxiety” (as cited in Craig, 2009, p. 294), a certain “decisiveness, firmness and determination. . . . [and] clarity” (Jacobsen, 2007, p. 292). To the extent we confront such anxiety Heidegger would label our behavior *authentic* (Craig, p. 294). Living *authentically*

means living honestly, in accordance with one's own "deep convictions, beliefs, values and goals" (Jacobsen, p. 291). Existential anxiety can be viewed as a tool to remind us when we are acting in accordance with something other than truth, and thus, not living authentically. In this way, such anxiety can be considered "a teacher and guide rather than something . . . irrational and pathological" (Craig, p. 294).

From my perspective, existentialist philosophy can be darkly attractive, and I would surmise that many independent, introspective individuals would agree. However, I wonder whether in some ways the existentialist perspective is more superficial than other approaches such as attachment or psychoanalytic theory. Perhaps it is simply by definition that this is the case, because, like the pure humanistic stance, it focuses on the present as opposed to the developmental history of the client. However, for that reason I also believe it can be beneficial. Some individuals are resistant to looking deeply into their past, often because it kindles so much pain. In such a scenario, the existentialist-humanistic approach may be particularly useful.

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