

Existential-Humanistic Psychology

Excerpted from Taylor, E.I. (2009). Chapter 10: “An Existential-Humanistic, and Transpersonally Oriented Depth-Psychology.” In *The Mystery of Personality: A history of Psychodynamic Theories*. NY/The Netherlands: Springer.

Another landmark event in the early history of humanistic psychology was the appearance of *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychology and Psychiatry* in 1958, edited by Rollo May, Ernest Angell, and Henri Ellenberger.ⁱ May began the volume with an essay on the origins and significance of the existential movement in psychology.ⁱⁱ The goal was to know the patient as he or she really is. We must ask, “Are we seeing him or her in their real world?”

Ludwig Binswanger and Martin Heidegger were the early voices of the modern period who developed *daseinsanalysis*—the existential-analytic movement in psychology and psychiatry. It was the study of not just an ill man, but the total person in his life context. Eugene Minkowski, Erwin Straus, and V. E. von Gebattel represented the first, phenomenological stage of this movement. Binswanger, along with A. Storch, Medard Boss, G. Bally, Roland Kuhn, J. H. van den Berg, and F. J. Buytendijk represented the second, more existential stage. Gebattel, Medard Boss, and G. Bally were Freudian analysts, along with Binswanger himself, who was also significantly influenced by Jung.ⁱⁱⁱ

As Straus maintained, the unconscious ideas of the patient were more often than not the conscious theories of the therapist. Existential analysis, on the other hand, was focused on the patient's existence, not the therapist's theory. In this way, according to Binswanger, existential analysis was able to widen and deepen psychoanalysis. The person was not studied according to some external standard, but according to the interior disruption of the person's own *condition humaine*. Life histories, narratives, and the single case study were the bulwark of the existentialist's research methods. Such qualitative methods lent themselves naturally to the psychotherapeutic hour and into the depths of the therapist-patient relationship. Binswanger's presentation of the case of Ellen West in the latter half of the book was a case in point.

The gist of the Humanistic movement, however, was not therapy, but the place of the individual embedded in the whole of the human condition, and the eventual achievement of a union between science and humanism. The part about humanism was obvious, but the founders also had about them the air of pure science as well, in that they searched, not for techniques for their own sake, but for the foundation upon which all techniques rest. Existentialism was "an expression of the profound dimensions of the modern emotional and spiritual temper and is shown in almost all aspects of our culture."^{iv}

May said that the cleavage between the subject and object Binswanger had called the cancer of all psychology up to now. The existential lineage comes through Socrates, Augustine, to Pascal, Kierkegaard, Schelling, then Nietzsche, Dilthey, and even James, Whitehead, Bergson, and Sartre, Berdyaev, Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Ortega y Gasset, Unamuno, and Tillich in our own time. It is everywhere throughout culture, in the writings of Camus and Kafka, and in the art of van Gogh, Cezanne, and Picasso. It is primarily

ontological, in that its focus is on our current state of being. The great edifice of science has very little to do with our current state of being. Quoting Tillich, May says: “Reality or Being is not the object of cognitive experience, but is rather existence, . . . reality as immediately experienced, with the accent on the inner, personal, character of man’s immediate experience.”^v The focus of existential psychology is not on objective man, but on the living man and living woman who are doing the experiencing. It is psychology as ontology.

Existentialists themselves begin with Martin Heidegger and his *Being and Time* (1962/1927), because he reflected the scientific temper, at least in the European sense.^{vi} But May chose to embark on an earlier historical comparison of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and the relation of their ideas to psychoanalysis.^{vii} First, May maintained that existentialism and psychoanalysis arose out of the same cultural situation. Both were a reaction to industrialism and its impact on the psyche, where anxiety, despair, and alienation from oneself and society were mutual themes. Freud wrote about fragmentation of the person and repression of instinctual drives, while Kierkegaard wrote about anxiety, self-estrangement, depression, and despair. Nietzsche wrote about ‘the bad smell of a soul gone stale’ and its effect on resentment, hostility, and aggression. Victorian man saw himself divided by science into reason, the will, and the emotions and trusted that this was the way to examine oneself--piecemeal. What followed, however, was a compartmentalization of culture along the same lines as the radical fragmentation and repression within the personality. Most importantly, what Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud also had in common was that they theorized upon themselves as a single case study.

Kierkegaard had asked ‘What does it mean to be an authentic person?’ He found truth as defined in relationship, which set him to the question of whether or not man can be divorced from nature, subject from object. His answer, contradicting the entire Copernican revolution upon which then modern science was based, was that the separation of subject and object was entirely false, and in this he predates the quantum physicists who later launched the same answer. Truth is not defined solely in terms of external objects. There is also an internal phenomenological truth based on what an idea means to a person, whether or not it is true or false according to external circumstances. In this, he also predates Rank and Sullivan. We react to what we are committed to. The antidote we seek is recovery of self consciousness--the will to power. By this Nietzsche meant the ability to overcome disease and suffering, and the potential to actualize one’s destiny--that is, May says, self realization of the individual in the fullest sense.

May compared Nietzsche to Freud on concepts such as repression, reaction formation, and the relation between artistic energy and one’s sexuality. They also shared a common understanding about ecstatic reason; that is, reason that spills over into intuition as well as wonder. But Freud lost this sense when he later developed his arguments too rigidly for psychoanalysis as a rigorous science. Reason then became logical and static in his epistemology--a mere method. May finally concluded that “almost all the specific ideas which later appeared in psychoanalysis could be found in Nietzsche in greater breadth and in Kierkegaard in greater depth.”^{viii} The three of them, at least, directed our attention back to the person having the experience as central to our understanding of man.

Papers then followed by May and Ellenberger on the clinical aspects of psychiatric phenomenology and existential analysis. A section followed of essays by Eugene Minkowski, Erwin Straus, and V. E. von Gebattel representing phenomenology. A final section on Existential Analysis presented three papers by Ludwig Binswanger, one of which was the case of Ellen West, concluding with an additional case by Roland Kuhn.

Binswanger presents “The Case of Ellen West” as an example of an attempt to understand schizophrenia from an existential, anthropological, and psychotherapeutic orientation. The time period for the case is the end of the First World War, when Ellen voluntarily sought treatment and entered the Bellevue psychiatric facility at Kreuzlingen, where Binswanger was in charge. The anamnesis revealed that Ellen arrived at Binswanger’s facility after attempts at treatment with two other un-named psychiatrists [Eugen Bleuler, who gave a psychoanalytic interpretation, and Emil Kraepelin, who gave a more biological one]. With respect to their understanding of the case, Bleuler’s psychoanalytic interpretation pointed to the unconscious repression of vital drives and instincts, whereas Kraepelin described her condition as the development and gradual manifestation of a pathological personality. Binswanger and Bleuler were in agreement that Ellen’s difficulties were an expression of her schizophrenia, but also acknowledged the relevant psychodynamic, developmental considerations and morbid propensities in her character. When after 4 months of treatment and observation, Binswanger revealed that they could no longer keep her at Bellevue and this meant that she would probably take her own life. Binswanger released her and, in effect, acceded with her wish to do so.

The death of Ellen West occurred in early April of 1918, after a 4-month stay at Kreuzlingen, despite Binswanger’s best efforts at convincing her to embrace life.

Existential analysis exposes the failure of psychiatric theories and psychoanalytic determinations to understand her illness and predicament, without a supporting anthropologically oriented clinical orientation. The existential analytic understanding of the life and death of Ellen West, reveals the pathological manifestation of several dominating ideas (related to her weight, in her words, ‘either thin, or dead,’ or ‘nothing’) and a subsequent self imposed “imprisonment in a world design...restricted... [and] ruled by very few themes”^{ix} We apprehend this imprisonment in the rejection of her body, of life, and the world, and understand it as part of the gradual disappearing of vital aspects of her existence. The existential anthropological contribution to the analysis rests in its illumination of this restriction and imprisonment, as a disappearing of existence not simply biologically apprehended through drive theories or as disease, but also as an expression of transcendence. This insight can be expressed by the fact that, “the human being is in the world, has a world, and at the same time *longs to get beyond it.*” Hence, the desire for transcendence by first disappearing through anorexia and then in the incessant desire for death, appears in the final analysis as a tragic and truncated expression of “an ambivalent and ultimately negative obsession” with “being beyond the world.”^x

Existence was the first popular work to expose the general reader to existential psychology. It was followed a year later, in 1959, by a landmark conference at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in Cincinnati. Abraham Maslow, Rollo May, and Herman Feifel were presenters at this symposium, and Carl Rogers and Gordon Allport were discussants. The symposium at the APA Convention represented the first meeting of American psychologists in a public forum to discuss this topic. Two

years after the symposium Rollo May (1961) edited *Existential Psychology*, a compendium of the talks given at that meeting.^{xi}

The symposium began with a discussion of the emergence on the American scene of existential psychology by Rollo May; a paper by Abraham H. Maslow on the value of existential psychology to American psychotherapists; a discussion on the relevance of death in psychology by Herman Feifel; a chapter on the existential bases of psychotherapy by Rollo May; a delineation of the objective versus the existential view of psychology by Carl R. Rogers; and a commentary on the above papers by Carl Rogers and Gordon W. Allport.

Carl Rogers (1959), the first discussant (APA Editor, 1959), had recognized the phenomenological and existential influences in his own thinking when he published *Client-centered Therapy* in 1951.^{xii} He had also been deeply influenced by Paul Tillich. Even so, he never completely identified himself with these philosophies, a fact which was probably due to his sincere and continued concern with the objective verification of his subjective findings. According to Spiegelberg, Rogers's objective leaning was at least as strong as the subjective influence in his work.^{xiii} This predisposition led him to focus his presentation on two divergent trends in therapy: the "objective" trend, which he identified with learning theory and operant conditioning, described as reductionistic, operational, and experimental; and the "existential" trend, which he described as being concerned with the whole spectrum of human behavior, a behavior which is more complex than that of laboratory animals in many significant ways.

Rogers elaborated by describing the objective trend as one which moved away from the philosophical and vague; toward the concrete, the operationally defined, and the

specific. In this view, the road to progress in therapy was to reinforce the behaviors in clients that exemplified the direction for improvement that the therapist conceived of as appropriate. He pointed out that this trend had behind it the weight of then current mainstream attitudes in American psychology.

Rogers identified the existential trend in psychology with the psychotherapists, and with Abraham Maslow, Rollo May, Gordon Allport, himself, and others. This trend, he emphasized, recognized the need for the therapist to be real, empathic, accepting, and openly and freely him or herself. In Rogers's own experience, such a therapeutic relationship allowed the client to be open to many possibilities including: considering what in him or herself was real; becoming confirmed in both what he or she was, and in his or her own potentialities; becoming affirmed, although fearfully, in a separate and unique identity; becoming the architect of the future while perceiving future possibilities; and facing what it would mean to be or not to be.

Rogers suggested that these two trends, the objective and the existential, which seemed to represent two divergent and disparate modes of science, might find rapprochement in empiricism itself. According to Rogers, what a positivistic scientist might view as Rollo May's vague philosophical principles, could easily be deduced as testable hypothesis. In the balance of his presentation he offered examples of this possibility. For example, if one looks at May's first principle, that neurosis was a method that a person used to preserve his or her own center or existence, a testable hypothesis might be: "The more the self of the person is threatened, the more he will exhibit defensive neurotic behavior."^{xiv} Rogers elucidated several other plausible and convincing examples in his talk.

Notwithstanding Rogers's insistence on the need for objective proofs, in his final argument he confirmed that, in his own experience: "the warm, subjective, human encounter of two persons is more effective in facilitating change than is the most precise set of techniques growing out of learning theory or operant conditioning"^{xv}

The second discussant, Gordon Allport (1959), commented on what he called four crucial issues from the presented papers. These four issues included Maslow's question concerning what European existentialism had to offer American psychologists. Allport began his discussion on this question by suggesting that all rational attendees at the symposium had to admit to being repelled by the European style of philosophizing and writing. He declared that American psychology had recast, "imported ideas bringing order, clarity, and empirical testing to bear on them."^{xvi} With these qualifications in mind, he admitted that: "*existentialism deepens the concepts that define the human condition... [and] prepares the way (for the first time) for a psychology of mankind*" [his italics].^{xvii}

Death was the second crucial topic which Allport reviewed. He supported Feifel's assertion that death is a large part of a person's philosophy of life and lamented the lack of death's inclusion in psychology's study of personality, and in the practice of psychotherapy. He also suggested that persons whose religious values were more comprehensive and integrated into their lives would have less fear of death, while those who had defensive, escapist, and ethnocentric religious values would be more fearful of death.

Allport's third crucial issue was the European preoccupation with dread, anguish, and despair. He suggested that trends in American existentialism were more optimistic in

their orientation. These trends included: client-centered therapies; growth and self-actualization oriented therapies; and ego therapies.

Finally, Allport took issue with a point made by Rollo May in his talk on the existential bases of psychotherapy. He understood May as presenting phenomenology -- or the client's own view of himself as a unique being-in-the-world -- as the first stage of therapy, and possibly, the only stage needed. Allport recognized May's description of the true existential-phenomenologist as one who would realize the "full reality and richness,"^{xviii} and ultimately the why of a situation. Even so, Allport argued that the unconscious of Mrs. Hutchens, a case presented by May in support of his six ontological characteristics, was "filled with Freudian, not existential, furniture."^{xix} Allport also argued that May relied heavily on psychoanalytic techniques in his existential analysis of this case.

Allport, himself, suggested that the phenomenological view may be the preliminary as well as the ultimate stage of therapy. Having reflected this understanding, Allport still concluded his presentation by suggesting that psychology needed to distinguish between client presentations in which the existential layer was the whole of the personality, and presentations in which the existential layer was a mask for deeper rumblings of the unconscious.

Even though it had been a prominent influence in European psychology for 2 decades, existential psychology was practically unknown in America until 2 years prior to this symposium (May, 1969). In the preface to the second edition of *Existential Psychology*,^{xx} May stated that a nearly exhaustive listing of psychologically oriented, existential writings in English included only 185 citations in 1961 while eight years later

Figure 2.

The Evolution of the Continental Philosophies of Existentialism and Phenomenology into Existential-Phenomenology Psychotherapy Operating under the Umbrella of Humanistic Psychology in the US

Existential Philosophy

Kierkegaard
Nietzsche

Phenomenology

James Brentano Stumpf
Husserl

Existentialism and Phenomenology

Bergson, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Buber

Existential-Phenomenological Psychiatry

Jaspers, Binswanger, Boss, Strauss, Ey
Van den Berg, Frankl, Laing,
Ellenberger, Wiggins, Schwartz

Existential-Phenomenological Psychology in the US

Allport, McLeod, Angyal, Van Kaam, Snygg and Combs, Tillich, May, Bugental,
Moustakas, Gendlin, Yalom, Giorgi, Schneider, Greening, Wertz, Mendelowitz,
Polkinghorne

Legend

Existentialism begins with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. The Husserlians presume they own the term phenomenology but they were preceded by Hegel. James, Brentano, and Stumpf then emerged at the end of the 19th century and preceded Husserl's formal system. Existentialism and phenomenology became associated with each other through the writings of Bergson, Sartre, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. Buber and Tillich, both theologians, stand out as independent interpreters. Existential-Phenomenological psychiatry is associated with Jaspers, Binswanger, Boss, Straus, Ey, Van den berg, Frankl, Laing, and Ellenberger. Existential-Phenomenological Psychology we associate

with figures such as Allport, McLeod, Angyal, van Kaam, Snygg and Combs, Tillich, May, Bugental, Moustakas, Jourard, Gendlin, Yalom, Giorgi, Schneider, Taylor, Greening, Wertz, and to a certain extent, Polkinghorne. The list is not exhaustive.

there were close to 1000. During those 8 years the vocabulary of existentialism had become an integral part of the language in American psychology. It was no longer a foreign school of thought, but had become an attitude that permeated many types of therapy and had also exercised an influence on the therapies that acted as correctives to orthodox psychoanalysis. Without being a separate school in its own right, it had become allied with the third force in psychology and the term existential-humanistic psychology had become commonplace.^{xxi}

Rollo May lent the final thought. His fervent wish was that existential-phenomenological philosophy might become a base for a science of individuals that would not fragmentize and destroy our humanity as it went about studying who we are as persons.^{xxii}

Endnotes:

ⁱ May, Angel, & Ellenberger (1958).

ⁱⁱ Henri Ellenberger, Leslie Farber, Carl Rogers, Erwin Straus, and Paul Tillich, among others, had helped him develop the final draft.

ⁱⁱⁱ For details on these figures, see Spiegelberg, H. (1972). *Phenomenology in psychology and psychiatry: A historical introduction*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

^{iv} May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958, p. 11.

^v May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958, p. 14.

^{vi} See Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie, Trans.). London: S. C. M. Press.

^{vii} He also directs the reader to Kaufmann, W. (1956). *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. New York: World Publishing Co., especially Karl Jaspers's essay "Kierkegaard and Nietzsche," pp. 131-157.

^{viii} May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958, p. 33.

^{ix} Binswanger, L. (1957). *Sigmund Freud: Reminiscences of a friendship*. New York: Grune & Stratton, p. 401.

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- ^x May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958, p. 314.
- ^{xi} May, R. (Ed.). (1961). *Existential psychology*. New York: Random House.
- ^{xii} Rogers, C. R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy, its current practice, implications, and theory*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- ^{xiii} See Spiegelberg on Rogers; Spiegelberg, H. (1972). *Phenomenology in psychology and psychiatry: A historical introduction*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- ^{xiv} Spiegelberg, 1972, p. 89.
- ^{xv} Spiegelberg, 1972, p. 92.
- ^{xvi} Spiegelberg, 1972, p. 94.
- ^{xvii} May, 1961, p. 94.
- ^{xviii} May, 1961, p. 96.
- ^{xix} May, 1961, p. 97.
- ^{xx} May, R. (1969b). *Existential psychology* (2nd ed.). New York: Random House.
- ^{xxi}
- ^{xxii} May, 1961, p. 83.