On Existential Psychotherapy
A Hermeneutic and Meta-Representational Perspective

Ian R. Owen

Given that Heidegger criticised Sartre, and anyone who would begin philosophy with consciousness rather than thinking being, and that he disliked existentialism for its humanism, it could be possible to misunderstand the role of hermeneutics and intersubjectivity in the approaches to psychotherapy that are existential. This paper answers these topics via the question ‘what is existential psychotherapy?’ Some of the many possible answers are considered en route to the favoured answer concerning hermeneutics, intentionality and intersubjectivity. Psychotherapy cannot remove the past nor can it sometimes alter the current problem. What is offered minimally, is an opportunity to change perspective and that invokes hermeneutics. With reference to other theoretical stances, these are also understood as hermeneutic and justificatory. One aim of the paper is to move towards practice and prepare for an appraisal and development of existential therapy. But before any retrieve, there is a need to come to terms with the history of the variegated set of positions called existential therapy. It is not possible to make an exhaustive analysis of all the writers who have been named ‘existential’ nor discuss practice in detail. This paper appraises Sartre and Merleau-Ponty who are nominated as the most central proponents of existentialism because they base their stances on the original work of Husserl and Heidegger (amongst others). Reasons are provided to justify this selection. Another aim is contextualising the broad church of contemporary existential therapy. What follows is not an in-depth appraisal but a sketch of some of the most salient points. The term “meta-representation” is introduced as a version of the concept of intentionality and links are made to developmental psychology. Below, a number of questions are posed and not all of them are fully answered. The paper argues for a rejection of non-self-reflexive, non-hermeneutic and non-intentional stances. Not only are human beings and relationships intentional and intersubjective but meaning requires a specific stance in order to judge the accuracy of alternative theoretical accounts.

This paper argues that in order to refine practice and theory, what is required is a clearer understanding of the hermeneutic position of oneself with respect to the manifold of hermeneutic positions that exist in everyday life, as well as the tangle of 400 theories and practices (Karasu, 1986) that comprise the ensemble known as counselling, psychology and the
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psychotherapies. In order for each practitioner to know how to proceed with a client, it is argued that one should be able to account for how one interprets the psychological situations of clients and ourselves, in relation to specific and general situations. To get straight to the point: it is argued that a minimally adequate account of the therapy situation is one that accounts for the different perspectives of client, therapist and other parties: this involves psychological meaningfulness. What stance or stances can be occupied to provide a proper perspective on the human condition, which can account for these different perspectives? Or better, what conditions are thinkable that organise or structure psychological meaningfulness, in that what is experientiable and understandable, is capable of being adequately understood from valid perspectives? The point is that not only is it necessary to understand how everyday psychological life makes sense through the conditions of its possibility but to understand how any therapy of the everyday life can be judged: It is necessary to judge between different hermeneutic perspectives, hypotheses of cause and effect and ultimate justifications and preferences.

Existential therapy comprises a number of philosophical reflections on lived experience. The question ‘what is existential therapy’ can become ‘whose work is included in existential analysis or psychotherapy?’ Is it just Heidegger’s critique of Freud? Or is existential therapy a talking therapy that excludes the possibility of using specific interventions? The first answer offered to the question of the scope of existential therapy is that there are many writers within the area who do not define their practice with respect to Heidegger and Freud. It is true that Heidegger’s critique of Freud has been very influential. But psychoanalysis is not the only form of therapy. And there is a great disparity between Heidegger and Freud on intentionality and consciousness. It could be argued that Heidegger’s claim to have improved on Husserl (a preference for the being of Da-sein and the relation to being or other Da-sein) is not a help to the work of therapists who are caught up in the mass of questions concerning the presence of the past and becoming more comfortable with themselves and the nature of human existence. Nor does Heidegger’s critique of Freud reflect the whole breadth of the field of existential therapy, which is also sceptical, and a critical space (eg Szasz, Laing). Nor does the Heidegger-Freud nexus say enough about the important role of hermeneutics.

A second look at the question ‘what is existential psychotherapy?’ could be to scrutinise its parts by asking ‘what is existential phenomenological philosophy?’ Or, even more generally by asking about its closest relative ‘what is Kantian philosophy and what does that do?’ Answers to these questions then run into considerations of the extent of the research required to create a sufficient answer. ‘What is existential therapy’ can become ‘which writers need to be understood in order to define the whole of
existential phenomenology?’ Or ‘which writers can be genuinely classed as existential even if they are not existential phenomenological?’ As regards philosophy generally, the point of the application of philosophy to therapy means valuing philosophical stances pertinent to it as better than non-philosophical approaches. To refine the question further would mean offering an answer to the question ‘who needs to be considered?’ Indeed, would the work be done when the whole of scope of what therapy does could be sketched? So let us consider the relationship between Heidegger and Sartre as a way of understanding a central facet of what it means to be existential.

The difference between Heidegger and existentialism

Heidegger criticised Sartre for his humanism and never classed himself as an existentialist. In 1945 Sartre gave a lecture that was published three years later in English as Existentialism and Humanism. In it Sartre made his crossover stance on Husserl and Heidegger clear and claimed that his work was in accord with Being and Time. “Heidegger as well as the French existentialists and myself …have in common is simply the fact that they believe that existence comes before essence - or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective”, (1948, p 26). Heidegger’s reply is the Letter on Humanism where he wanted to take Being and Time back from the French reading of it. “Sartre’s key proposition about the priority of existentia over essentia does, however, justify using the name “existentialism” as an appropriate title for a philosophy of this sort. But the basic tenet of “existentialism” has nothing at all in common with the statement from Being and Time - apart from the fact that in Being and Time no statement about the relation of essentia and existentia can yet be expressed, since there it is still a question of preparing something precursory”, (Heidegger, 1993, p 232). Caputo explains this difference as being due to Heidegger’s development in thinking since 1927 (Caputo, 1999, pp 229-231). The other phrases used to make this difference clear are that an ontic psychological, or anthropological, reading has been made of philosophy. For essentia to come before existentia means that possibility comes before actuality. What Heidegger concluded in 1947 was that thinking Being is “neither theoretical nor practical” nor a “conjunction” of them (1993, p 263) and that thinking is a return to a source, no longer in the style of previous philosophy, but more original than that (Ibid, p 265). It is clear that Being and Time is not a book on psychology and should not be read as such.

The difference between Heidegger and French existentialism seems to be as follows. Heidegger was strongly against the intuitus, which he thought was superficial. “The idea of the intuitus has guided all interpretation of knowledge ever since the beginnings of Greek ontology up to today, whether that intuition is actually attainable or not”, (1996, p
“Phenomenology of Da-sein is *hermeneutics* in the original signification of that word, which designates the work of interpretation… hermeneutics… receives a specific third and, philosophically understood, *primary* meaning of an analysis of the existentiality of existence” of Da-sein as the conditions for the possibility of a phenomenological ontology and historical comparisons of the understanding of Being (Ibid, p 33). But the penultimate footnote to the text of *Being and Time* reads: “Thus not existential philosophy” with respect to his evaluation of his approach as a “hermeneutic of Da-sein” or “analytic of existence”, (Ibid, p 397). So there is a good deal of difference between Heidegger and French existentialism (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Marcel and others).

Heidegger in *History of the Concept of Time* (original lectures given in 1924) argued that Husserl’s treatment of consciousness and intentionality was insufficient and that considering being-in-the-world was the answer\(^1\). But there is a counter-argument because Heidegger never got to grips with a host of topics to his own satisfaction and rejected formal and logical methods of answering the question of Being, as section 83 of *Being and Time* shows. The closing pages of *Being and Time* show its author pouring doubt on the worth of his approach. But in what way did Heidegger make intentionality more understandable by considering Being? Contrary to Heidegger, it can be argued that he did not further the understanding of intentionality by the five reductions\(^2\) in *Being and Time*. Did the promise of *History of the Concept of Time*, repeated in *Being and Time*, ever come to fruition? Perhaps, the attempt to better understand intentionality did not occur. Furthermore, there is a question as to the usefulness of a discourse about Being and the placing of intentionality and contextuality in Da-sein’s Being, because a discourse concerning mental processes is part of everyday understanding and speech and can be easily understood by clients.

In answer to these points, a first part-answer is supplied concerning what French existentialism believed: The work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre are selected as the two key writers who are definitive of the position of existential phenomenology: This is because they focus on the work of Husserl and Heidegger in the main, and provide a reaction to the natural attitude specifically, in the assertion that human being is intentional being. Ricoeur also commented on existential phenomenology and his definition stipulated three core topics of the body (1957/1967, p 208-9), freedom (p 210-211) and the other (p 211), with the latter two themes broadly in agreement with Sartre.

*Being and Nothingness* is explicitly a crossover between Husserl and Heidegger (amongst others). Section two of the introduction states “Husserl has shown that an eidetic reduction is always possible… For Heidegger …it can always pass beyond the phenomenon toward its being”, (1958, p xxiv). Sartre is in agreement with Heidegger when he asks for
“the exact relation which unites the phenomenon of being to the being of the phenomenon” to be understood (Ibid, p xxv). Some of the other relevant themes are as follows. Some passages in Being and Nothingness mirror Freud’s attention to the latent meanings of symptoms and dreams in his attempt to find explanatory wishes. Sartre made a parallel between Freud’s interpretation of the unconscious amongst the conscious, and urged an existential psychoanalysis of the symbolic relation between the individual style of a conscious life and the fundamental total structure that it indicates - a developmental inquiry (Ibid, p 569). Existential psychoanalysis focuses on the interpretative ability to understand the human condition that is prior to all understanding - and is tied to intersubjectivity. Sartre defined existential psychoanalysis as rediscovering, in each instance, the totality of each person. New positions on one’s own past can be attained through the analysis of on-going choices that are both free and determining of consciousness (Ibid, p 573). Sartre also wrote of psychoanalysis that “its method is better than its principles”, (Op cit). But whereas psychoanalytic interpretation should help clients understand themselves; existential analysis leaves that possibility to clients (Ibid, p 574). The work of Sartre on intentionality (1970) and temporality (1960) is heavily influenced by Husserl.

The important 1945 commentary by Merleau-Ponty mentioning Sartre’s Being and Nothingness is clear: Human being should not be considered only as the result of external forces that “shape him from the outside and make him one thing among many”, (1964a, p 71). The existential view is one that “consists of recognizing an a-cosmic freedom… as he [human being] is spirit and represents to himself the very causes which supposedly act upon him”, (p 72). A certain tension exists. On the one hand, “man,” human being, “is part of the world; on the other, he is the constituting consciousness of the world”, (Op cit). Equivalently, for Merleau-Ponty, the object is in a “relationship of being” to the subject (Op cit). But this central focus is not to dismiss the rich number of other themes, nor the central attention to meaning and interpretation of what appears to consciousness. In these respects, Merleau-Ponty commented that “relativism …is an anthropological fact,” (1964b, p 108) by which he seemed to have meant that whilst one deals with human specifics then relativism ensues, because to stand outside of history is to claim an absolute perspective and that is not acceptable (Ibid, p 109). Phenomenology of Perception has a thread through it of the treatment of meaning: Because some meanings are ambiguous or manifold, and these occupy the region of meaning, altogether meaning is an indeterminate region3 (1962, pp 6, 24, 54, 169). The relation to intersubjectivity is that bodily perspective is involved: “my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task”, (Ibid, p 100). Other people are an “inexhaustible ground”,

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Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty agreed that the body expresses consciousness. The point is that existentialism, according to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, deals with meaningful concrete instances in a way that sends knowledge and theory back to lived experience thus overcoming ‘dead reference,’ the practical and conceptual clichés that inhabit manners of thinking, speaking and relating.

**Hermeneutics as prior to cause and effect**

This section considers some aspects of meaning and intersubjective understanding before providing some answers in the following two sections.

The view of existential therapy in this paper is that it is primarily hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy in application to the practice, research and supervision of therapy. All therapies are ‘equal’ when understood as being hermeneutic in inevitably occupying a stance towards psychological and intersubjective life. Possibly there are as many styles of practice as there are therapists and it would be pointless to try and create uniformity amongst a school of therapists as long as some minimum standards of deportment were attained. But it is noted that where existential therapy differs from other approaches is that it is mindful of the difference between conditions for understanding - and theories of cause and effect (“formulation” as it is sometimes called). This difference does not always appear in non-existential approaches, which only focus on confused ideas about cause and effect. Before considering the question concerning cause and effect that is preferred in this essay, two points are selected as being important.

(a) Existential therapy is primarily phenomenological philosophy applied to psychotherapy, psychology and the human sciences in the manner of sceptical criticism - especially of the natural scientific, quantitative stances. This is not to say that as qualitative psychological research can pass without critical comment.

(b) There is the historical importance of Kant’s a priori style of argument as a backdrop within this approach to the philosophy of psychotherapy⁴ (Gardner, 1999). The style and content of work by Edelson, Popper, Grunbaum and Erwin does not help establish rules for distinguishing accuracy of understanding from its lack. Merleau-Ponty and Sartre occupy a place of opposition to Kant, yet the influence of Kant’s demand to focus on the possible and thinkable, prior to the empirical and actual, is clear. The main thrust of philosophy after Kant is to work out how concepts are effective or not, and to understand how humans understand, from the safety of the philosophers’ armchair. Philosophy is not the ultimate test of...
ideas against psychosocial reality. That is the job of empirical research. So in the philosophy of psychotherapy, logical coherence becomes a discussion of emotional and relational coherence and the consequences of the practice of ideas.

A pertinent philosophical question is ‘how would we know whether a therapeutic concept worked or not?’ The answer provided here is that a concept would have to be related to the aims and nature of therapy and details would have to be specified. The question of how we would know whether a therapy concept worked or failed can also be asked in the context of how any understanding is shared with clients. A pertinent question is then ‘how would we know whether therapy understood its clients or not?’ (A question asked from the comfort of the armchair of thought, rather than in the heat of the moment when therapists and clients can be confused and caught up in something they do not fully understand, emotionally nor relationally). The answer this paper provides is to claim that the key point is to have a theory of how the perspectives of clients and therapists co-relate, in the same relationship and conversation, according to the same topic they discuss. Without such a theory, then the centrality of dialogue and the face-to-face encounter will be misrepresented. Such a perspective would be related to clients in a way that can create an adequate understanding of meaning in the therapy situation. In order to appraise if existential therapy, or indeed any kind of transcendental philosophical approach to therapy, is sufficient or not, it would have to consider the conditions of possibility of therapy concepts as they lie between therapists and clients. This is with respect to understanding other persons, and so making tangible the nature of the influence of the past, the nature of emotional contact between the parties involved, the way in which the relationship is understood from a position which is neither wholly the clients’ nor the therapists’ instantaneous sense of the interaction as it unfolds. The topics under consideration usually focus on the generalised sense of other persons that clients have, ‘transference,’ an affective state or manner of relating, interpreting or thinking, which can be interpreted from the presence of clients.

In the above, the role of hermeneutics appears: There is a whole; however difficult it is to state what is included in it. Therapists mark out a part of the whole as important, in order to identify something as crucial in terms of commenting on the problem as clients see it (as indeed clients mark out a part of the whole as problematic). For this paper, hermeneutics and intentionality go hand in hand. There is a hermeneutic manifold of perspectives that can be taken towards any psychological event. One way of stating this is to say that there are intersubjective conscious senses of any cultural object: what this means is that there are many publicly-accessible conscious understandings of any experience. Another way of
stating the same is to write that all meaning exists within the possibility of understanding not only one’s own but also others’ understandings on the same object. These statements are perfectly in-line with intentionality in that there is a shared pool of the lifeworld, of cultural life, that shows how two or more persons can share the same perspective as one another5.

To take points (a) and (b) above, about the influence of Kant in existential phenomenology a little further, the area of agreement for Husserl and Heidegger is the relation between concepts and everyday experience. For Husserl after 1931, description is referred to as a “new naïveté, that of simple descriptive act analysis”, (Cairns, 1976, p 27), which implies an unclear hermeneutic position. For Heidegger, philosophy returns to the everyday as “the point of departure for the ontological problematic”, (1996, p 397). Heidegger’s hermeneutic position is in part a novel version of Dilthey and within the German tradition of hermeneutics.

Yet let us not lose sight of the work of helping clients. In answer to the question, ‘what should psychotherapy concepts do to aid practice?’ One response is that they should enable therapists to meet clients and understand them. If concepts made a relational, affective or other distance, whereby clients could not get help or therapists came to mis-understand, then a helpful encounter may not be achieved. (There might even be a purposeful role of intellectualising therapeutic work in order to keep the feelings of clients from ‘contaminating therapists,’ but that possibility must be dealt with elsewhere). In order to make this section more explicit, something needs to be said of the type of activities that occur in any therapy. Minimally but not exclusively, the following mutual tasks are meant:

- Understanding the problems of clients in new contexts, where what seems nonsensical or unrelated to them, is made clear by the affective and relational perspective of therapy, its psychological-hermeneutic stance. At heart, therapy is making sense of past occurrences, fearful anticipations, and problematic sensitivities in the present (etcetera).
- Making links between events, thoughts and feelings in a way that has not occurred for clients but is apparent from the perspective of therapists. Interpreting in the psychodynamic sense occurs and is part of everyday cause and effect interpretation. Such thinking is suggesting possible ‘causes’ concerning influential or motivating factors for feeling and action. “It would seem not unreasonable - not qualitatively different from the ways in which we come to conclusions in ordinary living - for the therapist to point out to her patient the verbal and non-verbal behaviour that leads her to think…” that such and such is the case (Lomas, 1987, p 33).
- Helping clients not miss their own strengths and reducing hurtful self-criticism. Helping clients to undo reifications of their self-image and their generalised senses of other people. Perhaps through appreciating their own
strengths rather than fixating on themselves as weak, under attack, unlovable, bad or useless.

- Entering into non-dogmatic dialogue and analysing emotional and relational situations with clients, including the immediate therapeutic one, with a view to enabling them to make better decisions and promote their quality of life.

Given that existential therapy is both hermeneutic and intentional, what does this mean?

If the differences between and within the therapies are differences of hermeneutic stance, then all employ some means of interpreting the intentionality of clients and self. At large, the importance of hermeneutics has generally been over-looked. One way of stating hermeneutics as a core concern is to understand it as the means of contextualising psychological problems and their treatment. For instance, one interpretation might be that they are only a reaction to current stimuli because of pairing between stimulus and response. A second, that they are due to the accrual of the influence of the past, where past attachment difficulties, trauma and defensive choices and positions, have created specific lines of development. A third interpretation might be that psychological problems are due to the accrued effects of stress on the brain and the physiology of an individual. A fourth might account for physical predisposition that through a first occurrence, is maintained by a variety of communications, implied requests and functions. All such stances begin with interpreting concepts out of everyday and therapeutic experience - and there is the relation between the part and the whole? But how, to what, why and when do concepts refer to psychological experience as a whole?

Practice follows theory, in that the understanding of the problem orients therapists and clients in some way. The first question that follows on is ‘how does psychological life make sense to anybody?’ Because a hermeneutic stance is prior to ideas of cause and effect, the two should not be confused and hypothesising about cause and effect needs to be investigated. One piece of received wisdom is that if it is possible to know how a problem started, it will show how it originally solved or avoided a problematic consequence. A second piece of received wisdom is that if it is possible to know how a problem is maintained, it will show how to curtail the problem. But is it at all possible to judge developmental lines in a person’s lifespan? Or to judge between resultant states as opposed to traits of the ego or personality? What are the most fundamental points that need to be taken into account when understanding psychological understanding?

The opening pages of *Being and Nothingness* provide an answer that is fundamentally hermeneutic. Sartre wrote of the interrelation between consciousness, the body and the cultural object, “abstraction is made when something not capable of existing in isolation is thought of as in an isolated
state. The concrete by contrast is a totality which can exist by itself alone”, (1958, p 3, a reading of Husserl, 1982, §15). What he posited is the following: Psychological qualities, relations, affect, intentions are all abstractions and do not exist apart from the bodies of self, others and community. Such qualities and relationships are interpretations and abstract nouns that indicate the inter-relationship between living persons in relationship. Consciousness is interpreted as intentional in meeting others in the lifeworld of everyday culture and society. Emotion, relating, thinking and complex co-occurrences concern different types of mental processes or syntheses and none of them are “concrete” in the phenomenological sense. For existential phenomenology, the manifold of meanings of cultural objects, as cognised beings, are interpreted as the result of mental processes. If these cognitive-affective processes are not accounted for, this makes human being insufficiently understood. The point is that this is a self-reflexive stance and that a wholism is required to understand intentionality and the implication of intentionality between people.

Accordingly, intentionality is a fundamental understanding and concepts about it are required to point to its nature and importance. Due to Brentano’s influence on Freud and Husserl, there is the commonality that they use versions of the concept of intentionality. This is because Brentano lectured to both whilst they were students at the University of Vienna. Intentionality is held to be a good interpretative form because it includes multiple types of intentional relation to an object. The reason for this is that one has first-hand experience of one’s own consciousness and it is then acceptable to assume that others persons are conscious too. Without intentionality, object-senses are considered but there is no account of how people can have several types of intentional relation to the same referent. Thus, existentialism is opposed to forms of interpretation that deny the existence or usefulness of intentionality in explaining the sharable psychological life. Freud and Husserl shared intentionality as a base concept and so do the population at large who understand it in a less precise way. It is easy to discuss with clients how persons distract themselves, how a topic appears in their thoughts, or show how a person is frightened that something will happen, or how a person is fixated on the past. All such manners of communication concern intentionality and not Being alone. Freud, Husserl and the everyday employ interpretation in the general sense. When we are with others, we infer that their speech, behaviour and emotions are in some way ‘caused’ by their consciousness. Such interpretation indicates the being of consciousness. One’s own consciousness never fully appears to self. The consciousness of others never appears apart from its mediated occurrence in the living bodies of others. Consciousness and its intentionality concern the number of ways human
beings can plan, remember, wish, play, love and hate… It is argued that this ‘meta-representational’ picture of the intentionality of consciousness has advantages over other types of theorising in that it distinguishes between the manifold senses and their referent. (More will be made of this distinction below where meta-representation is more fully explained). Therefore, existential therapy is a legacy of taking consciousness seriously and being able to create a theoretical discourse about how people are aware of meaning and relate to the same meaningful objects in different ways.

But many therapies that follow the natural attitude confuse cause and effect with meaningfulness. It is only in the existential and hermeneutic traditions that hermeneutics is given priority over cause and effect. Natural ideas of cause construe an effect as it being impossible for a specific human condition to be otherwise than it is, because of its specific cause. The existential view of ‘cause’ is the assertion that meaning is not at all caused in the way that matter is caused to behave. When meanings occur they are influenced between people, they are encouraged or chosen, they are associations and remembrances, there is the influence of the past and other forms.

An allied question with respect to meaning can now be stated. ‘What is the scope of therapy?’ The answer given here is according to the actuality that there are intentional ‘causes’ and ‘effects’. The psychological form of ‘cause’ is not the type of cause that operates within natural being, that an outcome cannot be otherwise. But rather that there is an influence or motivation between experiences and among people. Three kinds of cause can be identified after Kern (1986) and his distinctions are necessary to take account of the complex interrelation of these causes in specific instances:

1 Socially mediated motivations from contact with others, may become engrained, habituated and be understood by self, as parts of self that cannot change. They include the on-going presence of the social past. Socially mediated motivations are those of folk psychology, the ordinary understanding of emotional and relational life, understood in the context of the conditions of possibility of history, society and culture.

2 Personal choice, free will and personal preference exist in connection with habituated constraint in the individual (cf Sartre). Personal choice can be understood in the context of the conditions of possibility of personal conscience, social context and the effects of psychological trauma on the individual.

3 Cause in the material sense is due to physical inheritance and predisposition. Material cause (or “heritability”) in human beings is understood in the context of the conditions of possibility shown by the psychobiology that indicates mental and physical freedom and constraint.
These three types of cause co-occur and it is difficult to identify the precise influence of each in any client or their problems and answers to them. Any actual psychological influence is also an ethical question as to the value and extent that change might bring.

There could be further debate into the nature of philosophy and psychotherapy. For these are regions are far from having any consensus on how to proceed. There are a large number of writers who have contributed to the field of existential psychotherapy and it is true that many writers have not yet been mentioned with respect to those who have followed on since Sartre first published *Being and Nothingness*. Something does need to be said of the relation between these writers in order to make clear the stance of existential therapy to itself.

**Talking and action as parts of the whole of psychological meaningfulness**

This section discusses the scope of what existential thought can consider concerning speech and action.

Like the non-existential stances (of schools or individuals), the existential writers are those who comment on parts of everyday living, the whole of the ordinary psychological life of any human being. In everyday life, talking and action are moments of a whole as are all the specific parts of the whole, such as thinking, feeling, relating, planning, remembering so on and so forth. Talking and action are moments of the whole in therapy also. Despite whether change does or does not take place, emotion is linked to thought and action, bodily sensation is linked to imagination and memory to habit and to relating... The point is that the full range of existential writers comment on parts of the whole with respect to the talking and action therapies, as representative of the whole of psychotherapy. Practically speaking, talking therapy (psychodynamic, person-centred, interpersonal therapy, etc) is a part of the whole that focuses on the therapeutic relationship and meaningfulness. It seems to me that talking therapy is easiest for the largest part of the population to enter. Whereas action therapies (those demanding that clients occupy a specific hermeneutic stance and carry out specific instructions and actions) are more superficial because they are not as accessible in the way that talking is. The point I wish to make here is not to mistake the part for the whole. Talking and relating are parts of the whole, as is taking action. But because of the ease of talking and relating, with respect to taking action, it seems to me that talking and relating come before ‘interventionism’ (cognitive behavioural therapy or any specific request to ask clients to do something in order for them to help themselves). Therefore, any choice of how to provide therapy needs to appraise non-specific talking and relating to clients - as one approach to meaning - or to consider that there might be a
specific way of directly changing the meaning and experience of some situation through clients taking action. Because existential therapy is a philosophically informed set of approaches, perhaps it can find some answers to the further questions that arise. In a different terminology, I am claiming that the distinction between being and doing is a false one. This is shown by there being no guarantee that an intervention (which might only be verbal) will have any specific consequence. An intervention in relating may or may not produce any change. Alternatively, it might produce a number of changes to parts of the whole for clients. For instance, a verbal-cognitive intervention might promote change in re-evaluating self-worth, and promote changes in becoming more assertive and leaving behind past influence and so tend to make clients anticipate a brighter future and be able to empathise others more accurately - or it may not.

What is being argued for is a future task of accounting for the talking therapies that treat the person; and the action therapies that treat the problem (such as cognitive-behavioural therapy and other specifically interventionist approaches). On the one hand, the talking therapies are flexible and enable clients to take part in something towards understanding and helping themselves. (Perhaps the skills required for talking and relating cannot be wholly taught. In my experience of teaching post-graduate students, perhaps some trainees cannot be taught how to understand themselves in relation to others because their personality is disposed in another way). On the other hand, the action therapies are more specifically focused on teachable skills and require a specific focus for clients to take part in them. It seems that something of this dichotomy is also present in the broad grouping called existential therapy. The point is that if talking is more fundamental than action, in that all clients and therapists have to communicate in order to understand and negotiate help; then the action therapies go a stage further, and are encouraging a second, less fundamental stage of actions and analyses built on the necessity of there having been prior talking and relating. If this is agreed, then the less fundamental interventionist approaches need an account of talking and relating that is sufficient to engage clients in their therapeutic processes.

What has been stated so far are some exploratory steps in a philosophical approach to working out how concepts fit together or not. This is not identical with experimental methods in psychology. The next section furthers an exploration of psychological reality that connects with hermeneutics, intentionality and intersubjectivity.

**Meta-representation as a fundamental concept**

So, taking a step closer to practice, there arises the centrality of hermeneutics within the context of philosophical reflection on there being multiple, intersubjectively accessible stances, as these can be applied to the actual work of meeting with clients. For understanding hermeneutics, for
instance, there is the work of Rickman (1997, 1999) who bases his approach on Dilthey. Going further towards understanding the specifics of intersubjectivity, there is the experimental work of Perner and colleagues who have investigated the phenomena of shared meaning and the developmental changes that occur in children as they come to understand others and, for instance, the specific case that others can have false beliefs and what this means (1991). The advantage of an intentional or meta-representational understanding of consciousness and intersubjectivity is that there are marked differences between:

- Perception or primary representation in the five senses of what is current - and - presentation, or secondary representation, that occurs in empathy, recollection, anticipation, depiction or imagination, for instance.
- Mis-representation of differences, accuracy and inaccuracy, true or false, occur with respect to what is held to be the case - as opposed to what self or others might believe to be the case.
- Meta-representation is the “ability to represent the representational relation itself,” to represent representations, and specifically, to represent how others are representing a cultural object (Pylyshyn, 1978, p 593). This was explicit in Husserl’s theorising about intentionality: For instance, picturing presentation involved in visual works of art occurs through a “difference between “picture” and “depicted””, (Husserl, 1982, §99, p 245): Meaning that in the case of visual art, the canvass is perceived; whereas the scene that the painting is about is presented, depicted in the canvass. To be able to make such distinctions as these require an understanding of intentionality and Perner and colleagues have shown that major changes take place in children’s understanding of themselves and the social world around three to four years of age. This understanding is related to a move from understanding specific situations, to an entry into an empathic and intersubjective understanding of the world and all forms of meaning in it, as publicly accessible and reliant on the perspective taken towards them.

In the case of therapy, meta-representation means to represent that another person is representing their perspective on an object in some specific way. Husserl, Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty agreed that intentionality involves such a meta-representative perspective of empathising another human being as having a specific profile of an object, through some intentional relationship to it, which is different to our own profile on it. It is argued that this specific point is a minimally accurate understanding of humanity. Perner has established an experimental position with respect to the referents of different types of mental process and the cognition of reality. The work of Perner and colleagues is a genuine example of intentionality in developmental psychology. Perner concludes that “metarepresentation is in fact indispensable for modelling
the information-gathering process and thereby understanding how it works and how one can improve it so that the model of reality reflects as accurately as possible”, (1991, p 40). Meta-representation is: “Explicit understanding …that one and the same representation can have different interpretations,” (Ibid, p 102) or perspectives, and this is compatible with hermeneutics. The empirical finding is that three year old children generally “cannot answer explicit questions about why a person knows or doesn’t know something”, (Ibid, p 151). Perner and colleagues also show that the adult experimenters’ requirement for a verbal response from a four year old can inhibit the ability of children to communicate their understanding. When three year olds are permitted to point, or can answer by merely looking in the right direction, or are permitted to respond with physical activity, they point at the right answer in meta-representational experiments when they are three. The main finding was that children greater than three years old were able to make “a distinction between representing a fact and making a judgment about a fact”, (Clements & Perner, 1994, p 377).

Wimmer and Perner (1983, p 103) noted that five to six year olds could tell the difference between a lie and a mistaken assumption 94% of the time as opposed to 28% of the time for four to five year old children. Peskin (1992, p 84) concluded that the “success of the older children in concealing information indicated their new representational understanding that to influence another’s behavior, one must influence that person’s mental state”. Botterill and Carruthers conclude on behalf of Perner that the “theory of mind development cannot be explained in terms of quasi-scientific theorising, because scientific theorising would be entirely impossible without mind-reading ability”, (1999, p 94). Meta-representation is a development of Brentano’s intentionality and a genuinely useful development of it in a way that surpasses Heidegger’s to turn to philosophy and being, because it accounts for the interrelation of perspectives of self and other.

‘Mind reading,’ in an approximate sense, or better, empathy in the existential sense, is empathising within the intersubjective world about common referents and different perspectives on them. It is a condition for rationality and experimentation. For instance, it has been shown empirically that children who have more siblings are likely to understand when others have false beliefs earlier than those who have fewer siblings. One interpretation of this finding is to conclude that empathic ability, that employs imaginative transposal in to the place of other persons, is further developed through early socialisation (Perner, Ruffman & Leekam, 1994). The point for therapy is that traumatic memories and associations are ‘causative’ of the current state of clients in terms of how they relate with others and how they live their lives according to the cognitive and affective
senses that they find around themselves. In childhood, or for adults who suffer trauma at an earlier time, there have been harmful experiences and forms of communication that have produced insecure attachment styles. Verbal and physical violence, and neglect of the needs and rights of children, contribute to a tendency to be unable to re-attach securely to their carers, even in those cases where it is not the carers who have been the perpetrators of the abuse. Generally, the previous violations have the continuing effect that the adult becomes unable to soothe them and connect with other persons (there are a number of permutations on this theme). This factor often leads the traumatised adult to therapy in the first place, as they are unable to help themselves. Their ego-constancy, senses of others and ability to attach are damaged. They appear as strongly influenced by the past and have inaccurate understandings of themselves, others and the world in that they treat the current situation according to the old one and expect that the future will be as harsh as their childhood.

Close

What the paper has argued for is the view that existential analysis or psychotherapy is at least a wide church and sceptical of psychology as science. It is a critical space and the application of hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy to any form of psychotherapy. The task of therapy’s self-understanding is to account for permissable theoretical contributions and state what types are insufficient, in which ways. How do the interpretative stances work or not? How might some be more adequate than others? Why might one prefer concept A to concept B? Such are the type of questions that are at the heart of this tradition of philosophical thinking.

In a nutshell, it would be possible to show there are problems with both Husserl’s and Heidegger’s approaches to phenomenology. Husserl sidestepped hermeneutics in order to ascertain the a priori conditions of possibility for consciousness to constitute meaning with other consciousness. In so doing, he claimed it is possible to be absolute with respect to intersubjectivity in the sense that he could account for the infinite manifold of perspectives on the same cultural object because of the fundamental work of empathy, a mental process that quasi-gives the perspectives of other persons ‘when we understand what they feel and experience’. This is an absolute perspective because it relates the founding whole of intersubjectivity to specific perspectives of self and other on the same object, and so accounts for different perspectives on it, and the simultaneously different appearance of it, for more than one person. Heidegger sidestepped consciousness and intentionality (mental process) in order to ascertain the a priori conditions of the possibility for Da-sein to manifest the meaning of Being with other Da-sein in history. In so doing,
he claimed it is possible to refine hermeneutically one’s approach with respect to meaning, in the sense that he achieved an absolute perspective on the primacy of Being. His perspective related the transcendence of Da-sein’s Being in its everyday world, to historically accruing senses of the meaning of Being. Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty agreed that a philosophically-informed psychology must attend to everyday conscious experience.

When viewing the field of the therapies, there is no consensus and therapy does not have a coherent theoretical account of the manifold of ideas and practices that comprises it. How can we account for the lack of consensus? Maybe there is no formulaic correspondence between concepts and experience because there is the possibility of hermeneutic differences and influences of interpretation at every stage of reckoning. But because of the lack of consensus, even in the field of philosophically self-reflexive approaches like existential therapy, there is a need to justify one’s interpretations and actions. The first stage in doing this is to account for oneself and the approaches of others in some ubiquitous way, in addition to the help provided through personal reflection and supervision.

In summing up, there is a long and fruitful history of competing readings of Husserl and Heidegger, some of which are more accurate than others. The paper has argued that a development of intentionality, that a meta-representational theory of mind is acceptable to existential phenomenology because it can support hermeneutic understanding of therapy and differing perspectives. If the task of therapy is in part a pragmatic one, and if clients are able to use what it offers, then one aim is to help them flexibly in numerous ways. A further question is ‘what ways are suitable, in what conditions?’ On the one hand, dogmatism serves to reify and universalise ideas way outside of their context of applicability: for dogma there is only one acceptable theoretical-hermeneutic stance. On the other hand, the ability to account for the perspectives of others is a major topic for therapy and ordinary life. It is argued that there should be no slavish adherence to theory. If existential therapy is to follow its ability to be a critical philosophical approach, in scrutinising its own and other approaches, then it will have to account for the divide between talking therapy and working with the therapeutic relationship; and the more interventionist styles of working. The refusal of consciousness and intentionality smacks of radical behaviourism that refused to account for consciousness because it lies outside of that which can be measured and modelled by natural science.

Ian Owen, UKCP Reg, is an adult psychotherapist with Leeds Mental Health Trust. He completed an MA in counselling and psychotherapy at
the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, Regent’s College, London, in 1991 and first became registered as a psychotherapist in 1995.

Notes

1 It can be argued that Heidegger did not treat intentionality as intentionality but obscured Husserl’s comments in Ideas I on intentional implication and modification and turned away from the phenomena to Greek philosophy. Specifically, he turned away from the phenomena of the different types of givenness and abandoned a possible critique and development of the investigation of noesis-noema correlates. In Heidegger’s writing, Husserl’s phenomenology is defined without mentioning the major focus on the intentional analysis of noeses and what that means in terms of stating how mental processes work (for instance Husserl, 1982, §99, §111). It is not clear whether this was a purposeful mis-representation of Husserl’s case or not. However, Heidegger’s critique of Husserl made Heidegger’s phenomenology into an object-related study in the context of ancient Greek philosophy rather than the relation of the being of Da-sein to the being of what exists and how it exists for Da-sein.

2 The first and most explicit reduction is a philosophical and historical one, the same as defined by Husserl in 1913 (1982, §18, p 34, cf Heidegger, 1996, §6, p 22). Heidegger’s comments on the stripping away of the usual meaning and assumptions that occur when tools go missing is a reduction through the interruption of everyday unthematized experience. This ‘mistake reduction’ (Ibid, §16, p 68-69) is a reduction by the accidental disclosure of an assumption. Reduction also happens through the experience of Angst in which the assumptions of having a home in a safe and well-known world are temporarily eradicated (Ibid, §40, p 174-8). Fourth, there is the reduction to temporality and what that reveals as the ultimate horizon or ground of the Being of Da-sein and for Da-sein’s understanding of Being: “existential-temporal analysis of Da-sein requires in its turn a new retrieve in the context of a fundamental discussion of the concept of being”, (Ibid, §66, p 306 and §79, p 276-7). Fifth, through semantic ‘archaeology’ it is possible to reactivate or make a reprise (Wiederholung), a rediscovery of original meaning (Kocklemans, 1977). Heidegger wanted ontology to begin a deconstructive comparison, where contemporary ties of meanings are held in abeyance and checked with respect to the original meanings, practices and the worldviews of the ancients. It is not clear what makes ancient understanding better than contemporary understanding and why that is always preferable.

3 Merleau-Ponty, particularly in Phenomenology of perception, often expressed Husserl’s stance in a more accessible way than Husserl did.
This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty agreed with everything that Husserl wrote.

Gardner’s portrayal of *Critique of Pure Reason* states a focus on finding the limits of rational thought - as opposed to how thought can be over-ambitious. Page after page concerns a focus on the competence of what reason can comprehend in relation to conscious experience. Since Kant, philosophy has the job of deciding on the proper extent of thought before taking action.

This is in answer to Kant’s request to explore the “*a priori* conditions of possible experience in general are at the same time conditions for the possibility of the objects of experience”, (1993, p 128/A110). This means that the conditions of experience dictate the nature of the objects of experience and lead to the connection with intentionality, intersubjectivity and hermeneutics in relation to the manifold of possible meanings of one object, process or event.

The treatment of consciousness by natural psychological science falls roughly into two camps. Either consciousness is no special challenge to its methods and stance and its difficulties fall within its dominion. Or consciousness is not an object capable of scientific scrutiny and it falls outside of its limits. Both of these positions are current in psychology and cognitive science and have also existed in therapy. Cognitive behaviour therapy does not distinguish between the differing types of intentionality nor does it account for the intentional pairings of sense. For instance, the basic manoeuvre in behaviour therapy is to reduce avoidance and increase exposure to a feared object. What this often entails is breaking the composite meaning of a bodily reaction (eg Panic) that is in a paired association with anticipatory fear (say dying). What behaviour therapy does is to help clients be able to experience a panic episode without the conditioned fear. This reduces the occurrence and alters the meaning of panic. Furthermore, reframing is a hermeneutic procedure and stoicism is involved in asking people to overcome their fear of fear that has become habituated and generalised. Still the work of Fonagy (2003), Wells (1997) and Tarrier, Wells and Haddock (1998) warrants study.

There are five ‘axes’ that can be related to the centrality of Husserl and Heidegger. The first axis is to understand the relation of Husserl to his phenomenological philosophy peers of Scheler, the early Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. This axis comprises the core phenomenological writers and this group would also include Sartre but to a lesser extent. Overall, Sartre had a broader focus and belongs continental philosophy. A second axis would compare Freud to the phenomenological influence on therapy of the sort initiated either by Boss, Ricoeur (1970) or Atwood and Stolorow. And there is the matter of how to read Freud (Lohser &
Lacan could be placed in this grouping because he was influenced by Merleau-Ponty on the importance of language but he did not follow phenomenology despite having been influenced by Heidegger (Roudinesco, 1990, p 299). A third axis moves from Husserl’s influence to how it has been taken up by American phenomenological psychology, that is argued to be a rush headlong into non-a-priori experimentalism entirely against the instructions of the phenomenological philosophers who require self-reflexivity and analysis of justifications. A fourth axis lies in the direction towards hermeneutics. This path takes into account the specific contributions of Dilthey, Mannheim, Parsons, Ricoeur, Derrida and Gadamer, for instance. It is important, as it is a commonality within existentialism. There is a fifth axis toward the work of Levinas and ethics. There could be a more philosophical approach that would follow the trends from the Ancients, through Descartes to Kant and appraise Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaarde, Sartre, Foucault and others.

Wilson (1996) is a representative of a movement towards the use of empirically-validated manualised treatments. What this means is that therapy should be practised in a universalised manner for all persons who have a specific disorder. For him, there is no need to attend to the unique details of someone’s life because such material is not capable of validation in tests of inter-rater reliability. The upshot is that therapy should be practised according to manuals that dictate the results of treatments that have been experimentally proven to work.

References


On Existential Psychotherapy


