

**THE DISCOURSE OF EXISTENCE:
EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL PSYCHOTHERAPY
IN A POSTMODERN WORLD**

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In the last twenty years, the landscape of philosophy has undergone a major upheaval. Postmodern and poststructuralist thinking has wreaked havoc amongst such systems of belief as positivism and Marxism, and has certainly not left existential thinking untouched. Both Husserl and Heidegger have been key targets of Derridean (1974) 'deconstruction', and the very foundations of existential phenomenological thought have been brought into question. Against this backdrop, it would seem essential that existential phenomenological psychotherapists - defined in this paper as those who base their practice on the writings of Heidegger, Sartre, and other philosophers of existence - find a way of addressing this postmodern challenge. As Spinelli (1999) writes, 'if we expect our own views to continue to be treated with the respect and seriousness they deserve', then, 'existential phenomenologists must seek to provide an adequate response' (p.7) to the postmodern critique of existential thinking (let alone the post-postmodern critique of existential thinking!).

This, then, is the aim of this paper: to look at the challenge that postmodern thinking poses to an existential phenomenological way of working, and to try and find a way of responding to this challenge.

The postmodern turn

What is 'postmodernism'? To answer this question, it is necessary to begin by asking the question, 'What is "modernism"?' As an ideology, 'modernist' thinking can be seen as stretching back to the Enlightenment period, reaching its zenith in the 1920s and 1930s. The essence of modernist thinking is that humankind has the potential to liberate itself from the out-dated anachronisms of the past, and work towards a "better" future (Pocock, 1995): whether communist, fascist, or one in which individuals can more fully 'actualise their potential'. Related to this is the belief that a world of absolute, objective truths exists, and that by uncovering these truths, humankind can move closer and closer to its ideal. Within this world-view, science has a privileged place. As an 'objective' and systematic

means of investigating its world, science is seen as the royal road to a preferred future.

In the second half of the twentieth century, however, the cracks in this modernist worldview have increasingly begun to show. In part, this has been a consequence of modernist progress itself, particularly in the physical sciences. Here, the acceptance of such theories as 'relativity', the 'uncertainty principle' and 'chaos theory' have all challenged the notion of a measurable, knowable, Newtonian universe.

This has undoubtedly had a 'filter down' effect on those positivist disciplines that attempted to model themselves on the physical sciences: such as psychology, sociology and anthropology. Modernist political programmes, too, have sowed their own destruction, by demonstrating the horrors of an ideology that puts 'progress' and 'truth' before all other values. As Rappoport, Baumgardener and Boone (1999) write, 'the modern ideal of progress through rationality, efficiency and social control died at Auschwitz' (p.95).

Above all else, however, perhaps the most significant reason for the decline of modernist thinking has been the increasing recognition by philosophers (e.g. Wittgenstein, 1929/1996) that all knowledge is fundamentally located within particular linguistic frameworks.

Modernist thinking claims that it can establish objective truths through scientific inquiry, yet what it overlooks is the fact that this scientific process is based on a set of symbols, assumptions and conventions - the 'language' of science - which can not be validated through science alone. As Lyotard (1984) writes: 'Scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all' (p.29). That is, the moment a scientist talks of 'quarks' or 'neutrinos', they are evoking a particular system of beliefs which can not be shown true without recourse to another system of beliefs (e.g., magnetism, or the 'truth' of scatter plots), ad infinitum. Hence, as Derrida (1974) argues, knowledge can never be a closed system in which linguistic signifiers refer to 'real' entities that stand outside of a system of signification (what Derrida refers to as 'transcendental signifieds').

Rather, knowledge is always contained within a system of signifiers, signifiers that have no possibility of escaping the 'text'. As Derrida (1974/1996) writes: 'all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured by that play' (p.337).

This, then, is one of the central tenets of postmodernism: that modernism's search for objective 'truths' is philosophically untenable, on the grounds that any knowledge must inevitably lie within a network of interconnected signifiers, the truth or falsity of which can never be established by 'standing outside of the system'. Postmodern philosophers such as Lyotard (1984), therefore, have argued that scientific knowledge, as a system of signifiers is no more 'true' than any other system of signifiers; and he defines postmodernism as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (xxiv). In this, he means a scepticism towards any system of belief that attempts to legitimise itself through claims to a truth-beyond-words.

Postmodern Critiques Of Philosophies Of Existence

The philosophers of existence occupy a unique place in the development of postmodern thought. On the one hand, writers like Merleau-Ponty (1962), Buber (1987), Sartre (1956/1991) and particularly Heidegger (1926/1962) are key predecessors of postmodern thinking. Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty were two of the first philosophers to argue that scientific 'facts' are neither a priori nor 'objective', but products of human Being-in-the-World and experiencing. Similarly, Heidegger and Buber were two of the first philosophers to emphasise the fundamental intersubjectivity of human Being-in-the-world, a standpoint which has been adopted by those postmodern writers (e.g., Shotter, 1999) who write of 'truth' as an intersubjective social construction.

Yet what fundamentally distinguishes the philosophers of existence from the philosophers of postmodernism is the former's claim that 'Being' - in whatever form it takes (e.g., 'Being-in-the-world' [Heidegger, 1926/1962]; Being-for-itself, etc. [Sartre, 1943/1969]; 'embodied-perception' [Merleau-Ponty, 1962]) - stands outside of the nexus of signifiers as a transcendental signified. Heidegger (1947/1996), for instance, writes that, the dignity of man consists, 'in being called by Being into the preservation of Being's truth' (p.294). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1962) writes that the task of philosophy is to rediscover 'phenomenon': 'the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given' (p.57). Here, both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty are suggesting that there is a truth, a reality, an origin - a layer of Being which precedes the discourse in which that Being is signified.

This is not to suggest that the philosophers of existence have ignored the question of language. Indeed, Heidegger was one of the first philosophers to highlight the significance of language in philo-

sophical and ontological concerns. In his 'Letter on Humanism' (1947/1996), he writes that 'Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells' (p.284). He goes on to state that language is neither the utterance of an organism, nor merely a character of signification, but the 'lighting-concealing advent of Being itself' (p.284). Here, Heidegger seems to be approximating the Vygotskian position that language is a constitutive element of human Being-in-the-world. In this, he comes close to a postmodern outlook. Yet, in also writing of the 'unspoken word of Being' (p.306), and man's need to learn to exist in the 'nameless', it is clear that Heidegger considers Being to have the potential to exist 'outside of the text'. That is, he sees it as ontically and ontologically prior to the language in which it is 'housed'.

The problem with such a position, however, is the same as any other claim to metanarrative status: On what grounds can Heidegger (1926/1962) and other philosophers of existence assert the priority of 'intersubjective experiencing' or 'Being-in-the-World' over and above other narratives? It is simply not possible to stand outside of language or symbol systems to show that 'Being' truly exists. Ultimately, then, as with scientific 'truths' or political 'truths', the 'truth' of Being rests on the back of language, and has no possibility of wresting itself free from that play. As Derrida (1974/1996) writes:

Heidegger reminds us constantly that the sense of being is neither the word 'being' nor the concept of being. But as that sense is nothing outside of language and the language of words, it is tied, if not to a particular word or to a particular system of language... at least to the possibility of the word in general, (p.351-2)

Such a critique of Heidegger and the metanarrative status of 'Being' has major implications for those psychotherapies that are based on this philosophical stance. If 'Being' is simply one narrative amongst others, then on what grounds can an existential-phenomenological psychotherapist privilege the discourse of 'lived-experiences' or 'ontological givens' over and above other therapeutic discourses, such as the discourse of 'unconscious processes' or 'libidinal drives'? In contrast to an existential phenomenological position, psychotherapists informed by postmodern thinking - such as Anderson and Goolishian (1988), Pocock (1995), and Lax (1992) - simply distinguish between 'problem-determining' and 'problem-solving' discourses. Here, the role of the psychotherapist is to help the client shift from their current discourse to 'another discourse in which the problem does not exist' (Lax, 1992, p.74) - whether this is

a discourse of 'lived-experiences' or psychodynamic processes is of no great significance.

Existential-phenomenological psychotherapy: The discourse of Lived-experiences

At a philosophical level, it is difficult to see how one can counter a postmodern critique of existential-phenomenological philosophies. Quite simply, the moment one attempts to advocate the metanarrative status of 'Being' or 'existence', one is adopting a particular narrative framework, outside of which it is not possible to stand. In the words of Wittgenstein (1929/1996), it would seem that the running against the walls of this linguistic cage is 'perfectly, absolutely hopeless' (p.198).

However, there would seem to be a fundamental paradox at the heart of a postmodern-informed approach to psychotherapy. On the one hand, it is argued that the 'problem-determining' system that the client brings to the therapeutic relationship should be understood as a 'narrative'.

On the other hand, however, it is argued that no-one has the right to privilege their narratives over and above the narratives of another person (Lyotard, 1984). The question then becomes: Does the client come to psychotherapy with problems that are located within a narrative discourse, or does this particular 'storying' of the client's problems come from the postmodern-informed therapist?

From my own experiences, I would suggest that it is almost certainly the latter. Few clients come into the therapeutic relationship complaining that their 'discourse' of anxiety is profoundly problematic, or that they would like to find a new 'life-narrative' in which this storied-anxiety did not exist. Clients do not talk in this way because, in my experience, clients come to psychotherapy with problems that are located within a discourse of the 'real': 'real' anxieties, 'real' feelings of pain and suffering, 'real' concerns about their future. Indeed, I can imagine clients feeling profoundly dismissed if one were to suggest to them that their difficulties were 'stories' or 'narratives'. To understand a client's problems, therefore, in narrative, non-realist terms would seem to contradict one of the most basic principles of postmodern thinking: that no one discourse can be privileged over another.

What, then, is the discourse in which clients' difficulties are located? Again, based on my own experiences, I would suggest that it is a discourse of lived-experiences. Clients come to psychotherapy

because they want to feel happier in their lives, less anxious, or less filled with grief. What they want is changes at the level of lived-Being. This is not to suggest that a client will always communicate their difficulties in these terms. They may, for instance, state that the reason they are unhappy is because their husband won't make a commitment, because they have an 'unconscious' need for approval, or because their mother never provided them with enough 'holding'. Yet how many clients would want to see changes at these non-experiential levels if they did not feel it would lead on to concomitant changes at the level of lived-experiences? How many clients, for instance, would want to overcome their 'unconscious' need for approval if they were told that this would make absolutely no difference to how they experienced their world, whether in terms of happiness, anxiety, or self-satisfaction? Ultimately, what clients seem to want from therapy is improvements in their lived-Being.

Clients may see changes at non-experiential levels as a way to bring about these improvements, but, when it comes down to it, it is the experienced changes that really count.

In this respect, then, one could argue that the discourse of lived-Being has a privileged place within the therapeutic relationship. This is not because it is 'more true' than any other discourse, but simply because it is the discourse in which the client's concerns are located, and therefore the least imposing or 'violating' discourse in which to encounter the client. In adopting such a position, one is moving away from the Heideggerian idea that 'Being' and 'existence' are 'real' things, and instead moving towards the postmodern idea that 'Being' and 'existence' are particular discourses - a 'text of living' - which have no claim to an extra-discursive reality. In other words, 'experiences' are not seen as absolute or 'originary', but as a particular way of construing the world which are ultimately located in socially discursive practices. Yet, at the same time, what is being argued here is that the question of whether or not experiences are 'really' 'real' is, to a great extent, irrelevant. The point is that clients come to psychotherapy with problems of lived-existence, and even if this lived-existence is 'just' a discourse, there is still an onus upon the psychotherapist to engage with their client in this frame of reference.

The principle of Occam's razor also supports an existential phenomenological way of working. If clients enter therapy with problems of lived-existence and want to exit with solutions of lived-existence, then it would seem that remaining within the realms of lived-existence is the most parsimonious and direct means of facili-

tating this transition. This is not to say that the introduction of alternate discourses - such as a psychodynamic or scientific one - may not be useful. It may, for instance, provide the client with another perspective on their difficulties, or give them an opportunity to stand outside of the immediate livedness of their problem and explore it in a more metaphorical way. However, on the basis of Occam's razor, there would need to be a clear rationale for introducing these discourses, and moving away from the most veridical discourse of inquiry.

The most parsimonious discourse, however, may not necessarily be the one that the client feels most comfortable with. Clients may enter psychotherapy with lived-problems and want lived-answers, but they may also very much hope that these answers can be found outside of the discourse of lived-experience. A client, for example, may hope that they will experience greater happiness in their life once they have discovered the 'cause' of their depression. To a great extent, then, working within a discourse of lived-experience is still privileging one form of discourse over another, and that other discourse may be the client's preferred mode of exploration. However, consistent with a postmodern outlook, this is a 'local' privileging rather than a global privileging. That is, it is saying that the Psychotherapeutic arena is one in which the client has come to explore lived-difficulties, and therefore the discourse of lived-Being is the most appropriate discourse for this environment. This is very different from claiming that the discourse of lived-Being is superior - at a global level - to other discursive forms. It is also acknowledging that the discourse of lived-Being is often 'subjugated' (Pocock, 1995) - that is, it remains at a pre-reflective, unspoken level. Hence, privileging the client's discourse of lived-Being whilst holding other discursive forms in abeyance may be a means of helping the client to liberate their lived-knowledge - a form of understanding that will be essential in helping him or her to find lived-answers.

Conclusion

What this paper has outlined, then, is one means by which existential phenomenological psychotherapists can meet the challenge of postmodern thinking. The crux of this argument is that clients come to psychotherapy with problems of lived-existence, and that therefore, even if existence is understood as a 'discourse' rather than as a 'reality', the language of existence is of no less relevance to the Psychotherapeutic encounter. Indeed, as one of the few psychotherapies that engages the client in the same language as that which

the client engages with psychotherapy, an existential phenomenological way of working can be seen as a quintessentially postmodern approach.

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