

THE TOOLS OF BEING: AN EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE PAST

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Introduction

Mark, a thirty-eight year old client, has begun to realise how much he distrusts women. He specifically asks for a male counsellor, talks with increasing venom about his ex-girlfriend, and complains that 'the tables have now turned' against men. In the sixth session, Mark discloses that, as a child, he was physically abused by his mother, and regularly humiliated by her in front of her friends.

Nineteen year old Sandra is 'encouraged' into counselling by her parents. 'They say that I have very low self-esteem' she says. Sandra seems unfocused and detached in the counselling sessions, and although she says that she wants to 'sort things out', seems very vague as to what exactly it is that she wants sorting. As the relationship develops, she increasingly turns to her counsellor for direction, with questions like, 'What shall I talk about?' and, 'Do you know what I should do?' Regarding her childhood, Sandra says that her parents worried furiously over her: 'I couldn't even go out without them bickering over who I was allowed to see.'

In both the fictional examples of Mark and Sandra—as in the vast majority of cases that counsellors encounter on a day-to-day basis—it seems evident that the client's present difficulties are in some way related to their past experiences. Indeed, that a relationship exists between present and past is virtually a *sine qua non* of much counselling practice. And yet, whilst it may seem clear that the past is related to the present, specifying more precisely the nature of this relationship is by no means straightforward. Can we say that, for instance, that a client's past *causes* them to behave in a particular way; that it *influences* them to behave in a particular way; or, should we go so far as to say that a client's 'past' is simply a re-construction of their present Being?

The 'natural science' perspective

Within the field of counselling, two views of the past have tended to predominate. The first of these, rooted in a Newtonian universe of linear forces and perpetual motion, hypothesises that past, present and future are three consecutive points on a 'time-line', with the present moving imperceptibly from what was to what will be (figure 1).

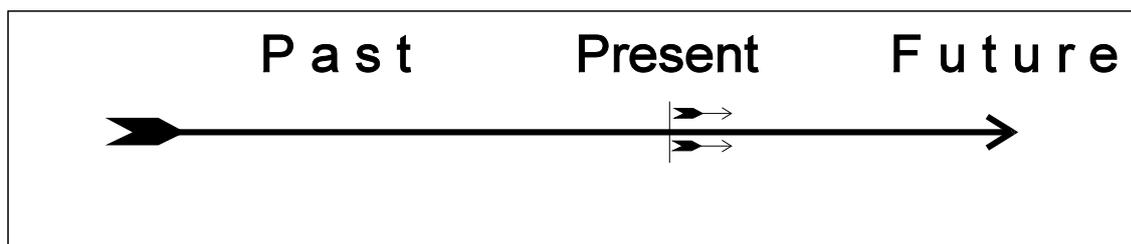


Figure 1: The natural sciences perspective

Within this scheme of things, the past always precedes the present—one can not start a line in the middle. Hence, any event which a client experiences in the present—whether depression, emotional illiteracy, or transference feelings of love towards their counsellor—is preceded by some event in the client's past—it can not just emerge from nowhere. This view of the past is particularly prevalent in those forms of counselling which are fundamentally rooted in the scientific thinking of the previous century: most notably the psychodynamic approach. Freud, as a child of the nineteenth century natural sciences, plotted out a developmental path as linear as that of Newton's laws of motions: where

childhood disturbances lead to psychological difficulties in later life. From this perspective, then, we might hypothesise that Mark's abusive mothering led to his misogynistic leanings, or that Sandra's dominating parents have caused her to lack self-direction. Granted, we may accept that there are multiple short- and long-term precursors to an individual's difficulties, but, ultimately, from a natural scientific perspective, we would hold that everything an individual does is a consequence of past precursors.

The view that past precedes present is so embedded in our culture that we may simply take it for granted. Indeed, for many counsellors, the tendency to look for past precursors to a client's present difficulties can tend towards something of a knee-jerk reaction. And yet, not all counselling models, amongst them the existential approach, hold that the present is a consequence of the past.

Existential philosophers and counsellors advocate a wide range of positions, yet what they share is a belief in the primacy of experience. In other words, existential thinkers tend towards the position that to understand human beings, we must start with an understanding of how human beings *experience* their world. 'How is it to be reading this paper at this point in time?' 'Are you feeling interested? confused? hungry?' and, 'What is your experience of these feelings like?' These are the kinds of lived-experiences that an existentialist might be interested in. Not, however, simply out of a fascination with the experiential dimension of human being; but on the epistemological principle that, 'we can know only what we live' (Warnock, 1995, *xvii*). In other words, existentialists propose that all we can know about the world is what we experience—it is not possible for us to stand outside of our experiences to make 'objective' statements about the world. So although the natural science perspective might claim as 'objectively' true the 'fact' that past precedes present, from an existential position, this is only true to the extent that this is how we actually experience our world.

How has it been for you to be reading this paper so far? Perhaps you noted a vague sensation of curiosity or fatigue, perhaps you found it hard to identify any feelings, or perhaps you just skipped over the question to get to the next sentence. Either way, if we begin our investigation of human beings from the standpoint of how individuals experience their world, what we find is that our starting point is the individual's present rather than their past. As you read this sentence, what you are first and foremost experiencing are these words that you are presently reading, not the words that you read in the past sentence. Moreover, as you read this sentence, it seems unlikely that you would experience this reading as one that is *caused* or *made to happen* by your reading of the previous statement? Influenced, perhaps, but from the standpoint of how we experience our world, a sense of freedom, choice and possibilities tends to eclipse that of being caused.

In the same way, then, Mark is first and foremost feeling hostility towards his partner, and, in his experience of this hostility, he is unlikely to be experiencing it as caused by his mother's humiliating behaviour. Granted, Mark may then think back to some of his past experiences to make sense of his present feelings; but, in this case, it would seem that the present comes first, with the past an appendant to the immediate now.

The 'here-and-now'

Taking the position that our present experiencing precedes any past 'precursors', one might therefore conclude that what is of fundamental therapeutic importance is the client's here-and-now: the immediate, smack-in-the-moment present. In contrast to the linear model of the natural sciences, such a position puts to one side those past events that no longer exist and focuses solely on what the client is 'really' experiencing (see figure 2). From this perspective, Sandra's current feelings of uncertainty become the focus of therapeutic concern: this is what is real for the client, the past is exactly that... past.

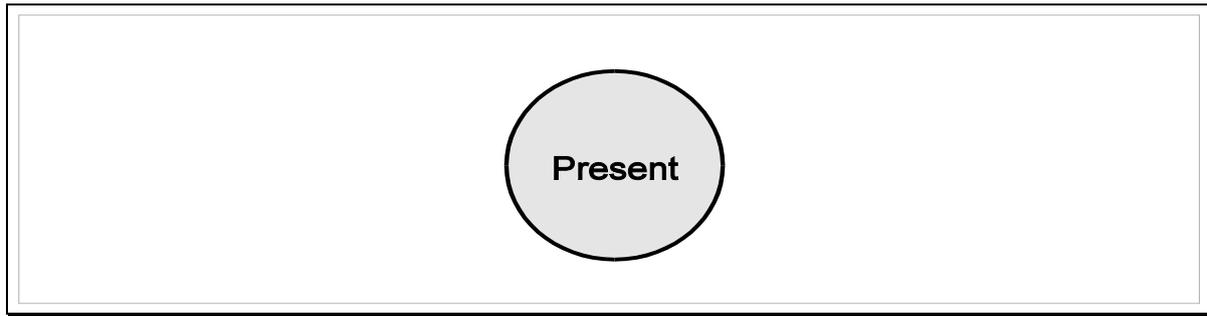


Figure 2: The here-and-now perspective

Such a focus with the ‘here-and-now’ is often associated with the existential approach. And yet, the majority of existential philosophers and practitioners are as likely to be as critical of the ‘here-and-now’ perspective as the natural sciences one. True, our experiencing may be a present occurrence, but this current experiencing is fundamentally affected by our experiences in the past. As you read this sentence, for instance, you do so in the present, yet the way you presently experience this sentence is intrinsically related to experiences you have had in the past: e.g., those papers on counselling theory that you have read previously. Had you read the title of this paper, for instance, as, ‘A Guide to Wines of the Maipo Valley’, your present experience of reading this paragraph would be fundamentally different: ‘Why the hell is he writing about existentialism?’ you might be asking. Hence, from an existential perspective, it is not possible to isolate an individual’s here-and-now experiencing from their past experiencing—at every moment, we carry with us what we have been before. Nor, from an existential perspective, is it possible to isolate the individual’s ‘here-and-now’ being from their future being. For Sartre (1956/1995), for instance, being is fundamentally end-orientated, such that we are consistently acting towards goals of our own making. Hence, if you were reading this paper out of a desire to develop an understanding of existential thinking, your experience of it might be very different to someone who was reading it for the purposes of correcting any grammatical errors.

The past as tool of being

Existential thinkers such as Sartre (1956/1995) and Heidegger (1926/1962), then, have argued that the past is fundamentally interwoven with the present and future, such that neither one can be considered anterior to the others. This is not to suggest, however, that we experience our past in the same way that we experience our present and future. Rather, Sartre argues that our past is that strand of our Being which we experience as ‘calcified’: ‘that which is without possibility of any sort... that which has consumed its possibilities’ (p.116). In other words, Sartre is suggesting that the past is that part of our experiencing which we experience as experienced—which no longer feels infused with the breath of active-being, but feels ‘congealed’ and ‘solidified’, as if it has slid quiescently into the world of ‘things’. This is not to suggest that the past *is* fixed, nor that how we perceive the past is immutable—an experience which feels deeply humiliating the morning after may seem ludicrously funny some years later. Rather, it is to suggest that past experiences, as we experience them, have a sense of being fixed and devoid of choices. This contrasts with our experience of the present or future: characterised by a sense of freedom and possibilities.

If our past is experienced as calcified and fixed, then it can no more make a present happen than an inanimate hammer, in itself, can bang a nail into a wall. For either event to occur, what is required is an animate, choice-making, purposeful human being. And yet, an animate, choice-making, purposeful human being, by him or herself, would face tremendous difficulties translating her goals into achievements—as anyone who has tried to bang a nail in with the palm of her hand will know! Hence, whilst objects-without-possibilities may not *make* things happen, they have the potential to play a fundamental role as the tools by which the human being can extend his abilities to act on his world. Perhaps, then, we might say that the past, though unable to *make* a present happen, has the possibility of acting as a tool by which the present can act towards its future: furnishing it with expectations, strategies, meanings, beliefs, values, fears, etc. to facilitate the future-making process. In other words, rather than seeing the past as something which precedes present and future, or as something which is

absent from being, we might suggest that the past is thrown by the present into the future, as a means by which the human being strives towards her ends (figure 3).

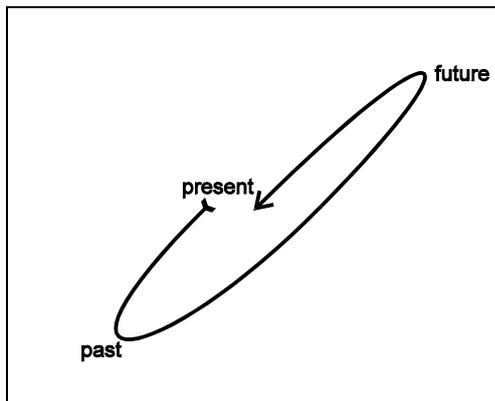


Figure 3: an existential perspective

Viewed in this way, an understanding of a client's past remains central to the counselling process. Not, however, as a means of understanding what has made them behave or feel in the way they do; but as a means of understanding the strategies by which they attempt to move towards their chosen future. Put crudely, we might suggest that the client's past is like a tool-box, into which they delve when attempting to achieve a goal. In this way of thinking, problems will arise when the tools that the client attempts to apply are inadequate for the job.

Mark, as we have seen, is increasingly acknowledging his misogynistic feelings towards women. How might we make sense of this experience? Let us assume that Mark's basic goal is to achieve a feeling of well-being and satisfaction in his life. He wants to achieve this with his girlfriend, yet he experiences intense anger at some of the things she does—like going away for a weekend with her friends. When his girlfriend tells him that she wants to go away, Mark, naturally enough, attempts to make sense of the situation. *She* knows, well enough, that she is going away because she needs a break from work. Yet Mark can not 'get inside' her mind. So how else can he make sense of the situation? If you had never tasted a lime, but you knew that a lime tasted like a lemon, then you would use your knowledge of a lemon to guess how a lime might taste. Equally, as Mark does not know what his girlfriend is up to, he tries to make sense of it by using the next best source of information: other women in his life, and particularly the woman he has had most experience of, his mother. When Mark's mother was alone with her friends, she would tell stories about Mark and think up new ways to humiliate him. So Mark has every reason to assume that his girlfriend will behave in a similar way. Not wanting to experience that humiliation—and he knows, from his past, how painful that is—he expresses anger towards his girlfriend in an attempt to stop her from obstructing his overall goal of well-being.

In this sense, Mark's behaviour is intelligible, but it is also inappropriate. Not because it's immoral, illogical or uninformed, but because it simply isn't going to help him get to where he wants to go. And the reason for this is because it simply doesn't correspond to the world that he is trying to act upon. His anger towards his girlfriend for 'trying to humiliate him' is like trying to bang in a drawing pin with a sledge-hammer. First, it's likely to make a hell of a mess. Mark's girlfriend, who simply wants a break from work, may well end up feeling confused and resentful at Mark's response to what feels like a legitimate need. If she expresses her anger, he may then feel even more convinced that she is out to 'get at him', which can leave her feeling more resentful, etc. Second, Mark is expending a considerable amount of energy unnecessarily. This fissure, then, between the tools that the client currently adopts to encounter their world, and the tools by which they may most effectively attain their ends, is the point into which the counsellor can introduce some therapeutic leverage. By examining, with the client, the effectiveness of current tools and the possible effectiveness of alternative tools, the counsellor can facilitate the client's ability to reach her own goals.

Such an exploration, perhaps, could be conducted without recourse to a client's past, yet an understanding of the client's past facilitates this investigation in a number of ways. First, the past provides client and counsellor with some clues as to how the client may choose to act towards his world. By knowing, for instance, that Mark experienced his mother as humiliating and somewhat malicious, it gives Mark and his counsellor an inkling that he may tend towards expecting other women to act in this way. Second, by contextualising the client's choices, an understanding of the client's past provides the client with a sense that he is not wrong, mad or irrational for choosing in the way that he does; but that he is an intelligent human being who is struggling to act towards his world in the best way that he knows how. Had Mark, for instance, acknowledged his feelings of deep distrust towards women purely in isolation, he may have felt guilty or stupid for such feelings. Acknowledging, instead, that these feelings are rational and intelligent insights derived from past experiences, he may be more likely to come away with a sense of empowerment and self-respect. And yet, third, by acknowledging the past experiences on which these insights are based, he is provided with an opportunity to examine whether or not the world he now encounters is the same as the world on which his insights are derived. Is Mark's girlfriend about to behave towards him in the same way that his mother did? This may not be a question that Mark can answer within the therapeutic relationship, but, by identifying the question, it may encourage him to find answers from—and communicate openly with—the only person who can really answer it... his girlfriend.

As well as helping us to understand how a client relates to those around them, the notion of past-as-tool may also help us to understand—and use therapeutically—the client's relationship to their counsellor. From a psychodynamic position, the way in which the client relates to their counsellor can be traced back to the manner in which they related to one or more significant others in their early life: the transference phenomenon. Existentially, however, the client's experiencing of their counsellor is exactly that: their experiencing of their counsellor, irreducible down to a prior mode of experiencing (Shlien, 1984; Spinelli, 1995). This is not to say, however, that the client's mode of relating to their counsellor is unconnected to previous modes of relating—rather, that the connection is one in which the client in the present turns back to past modes of relating to move towards their future. Sandra, for example, enters counselling with a desire to feel better about herself, and to find some kind of direction in life. But how can she achieve this in the therapeutic relationship? Based on the assumption that the counsellor will behave like other significant adults in her life, she may not feel there is much point in her making her own decisions: she'll only be criticised, put-down or simply ignored. Far better, within her own world view, to let her counsellor come up with some ideas. If they're good, she can try them out; if they're bad, she can just ignore them. And, at the same time, a bit of passive resistance on her behalf will give her the satisfaction of 'getting the counsellor back' for being a critical, judgmental adult. Of course, from the standpoint of the counsellor, such logic doesn't make sense, because the counsellor *knows* how different she is from the client's parents. But to assume that the client can also see that is a case of 'false consensus seeking': the belief that others see the world in the way that we do. With only minimal self-disclosure, on what basis should Sandra come to know who the counsellor really is? Rather, with all the tools of her past knowledge, Sandra does the best of a difficult job, and ends up making sense of the counsellor in the most effective way she knows how. If she has learnt that adults put you down when you say what you want, then she's every reason to assume that the counsellor will do the same.

Again, however, the reality is that the counsellor won't do the same, and this is where the therapeutic process has some leverage. Working together, client and counsellor have the opportunity to clarify the kinds of assumptions that the client has regarding the counsellor—and, quite possibly, other adults in her life—and examine the extent to which these assumptions help the client get towards her goals. Is Sandra really going to serve her interests best by abdicating her own responsibility and instead picking and choosing between the choices others make for her? Perhaps as a child, but perhaps as an adult there are more effective ways by which she can act towards her ends.

To propose, however, that a client acts on the *basis* of their past—rather than as a *consequence* of their past—is by no means to minimise the importance that the past can have in an individual's development. Nor is it to suggest that the client is therefore to *blame* for whatever difficulties they

encounter. Take the example of a young female client who, after many years of on-going childhood sexual abuse, present herself to a counsellor as experiencing marked feelings of depression and hopelessness, with an inability to form intimate, trusting relationships. Encountering such a client, from an existential perspective, one might tend towards the position that such hopelessness and distrust is a choice in response to, rather than a consequence of, the client's sexual abuse. And yet, to re-frame the problem in such a way is not to suggest that the client's misery is 'her own fault', nor that the childhood abuse has no significance for her subsequent development. Rather, it is to suggest that the client has determined for herself a way of being which, based on her past experiences, is the most constructive, adaptive and liveable one she has been able to create. If she has been constantly disappointed by others in the past, choosing a hopeless stance towards her future may be a means of protecting herself against further disappointment. If others have betrayed her trust in the past, choosing to distrust and avoid intimate relationship may be a means of ensuring her own safety. True, the world that the client now encounters may be more trustworthy than the world that she is basing her choices on, but she is not naive or ignorant for clinging on to what she knows to be safe; rather, she is choosing to look after herself in the best way she knows how. Only, perhaps, when she feels validated, respected and safe in the choices that she has made, will she have acquired a past which indicate that there is some safety in trusting-towards-a-future.

Conclusion

Ultimately, then, the existential perspective on the past presented here is an attempt to both value and respect who the client is, as well as who the client has been (along with who the client wants to be). This is undoubtedly not the only means of achieving this goal, nor is it the only existential perspective on the past (see, for instance, Spinelli (1994)). Yet what it presents is a way of being with the client in the totality of their experiencing: as present, future, and past. It meets the client in their immediate being, yet it also acknowledges the extent to which this immediate being turns to its past to act towards its future—an on-going flux of human experiencing. Whilst such a re-visioning of the past may contrast radically with the way in which natural sciences have presented it, it is an attempt to return the past to its place in actual lived-experience: a place in which it is both with us, behind us and ahead of us, yet not the totality of who we are.

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