



# Existential Therapies

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## 2. Existential Philosophy: an Introduction

At the heart of each of the therapies discussed in this book is an existential philosophical stance. The deeper, then, that one can understand this philosophical stance, the deeper one can grasp the heart and soul of these existential therapies.

Unfortunately, the field of existential philosophy is surrounded by much confusion and misunderstanding. For many people it is associated with images of gloomy cafés in post-World War II France and Gaulloises-smoking intellectuals furtively discussing the meaninglessness of existence. Many people also associate it with such concepts as nihilism, angst, atheism and death. These images and associations have tended to arise because existential philosophy is sometimes equated with the existentialist movement of Jean-Paul Sartre and his circle, who did, indeed, develop their writings in France around the end of World War II, and took a relatively sober – though by no means pessimistic (Sartre, 1945/1996) – view of existence. Today, however, the term ‘existential philosophy’ tends to be used in a broader sense, to refer to the writings of a loosely connected group of thinkers who are neither predominantly French, atheistic or concerned with the meaninglessness of existence (Guignon, 2002) (see Box 2.1).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, whilst many of these thinkers were active around the first half of the twentieth century, existential ideas have a lineage that ‘can be traced far back in the history of philosophy and even into man’s pre-philosophical attempts to attain some self-understanding’ (Macquarrie, 1972: 18). Existential ideas, questions and ways of philosophising have been identified in the teachings of such notable figures as Socrates, Jesus and the Buddha (Macquarrie, 1972), as well as in such ancient philosophical systems as Stoicism (van Deurzen, 2002a).

The confusion surrounding existential philosophy, however, has not been helped by existential philosophers themselves. Many of these philosophers’ writings are exceedingly opaque; and some, such as Kierkegaard (1846/1992), have deliberately aimed to express their ideas indirectly. Take the following passage, for instance: ‘The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself’ (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980: 13). The fact that existential philosophers have also advocated highly diverse – and, at times, divergent – points of

### BOX 2.1 Key existential philosophers

- **Kierkegaard, Søren** (1813–55): Danish philosopher and father of modern existentialism. Criticised the lack of passion and the conformity of nineteenth century Christendom, as well as the all-embracing, abstract philosophising of Frederick Hegel. Argued that human beings needed to turn towards their own subjective truths, and make a personal leap of faith towards God.
- **Nietzsche, Friedrich** (1844–1900): German philosopher. Attacked the slavish, herd mentality of conventional Christianity, and preached an atheistic gospel of aspiration towards the *Übermensch*: the autonomous superman who creates his or her own values and morality, and lives an earthly life of passion and power.
- **Buber, Martin** (1878–1965): Jewish philosopher and theologian. Emphasised the relational nature of human existence, and the distinction between 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' modes of relating.
- **Jaspers, Karl** (1883–1969): German psychiatrist-turned-philosopher, whose ideas underpinned many twentieth century developments in existential philosophy, amongst them the unavoidable 'boundary situations' that human beings face.
- **Tillich, Paul** (1886–1965): German protestant theologian who fled to the United States in the 1930s, bringing with him the existential style of philosophising. Advocated courage in the face of the anxiety of non-being, and distinguished between 'existential' and 'neurotic' anxiety and guilt.
- **Marcel, Gabriel** (1889–1973): French philosopher, playwright and Christian. Emphasised the mysteriousness and immeasurability of existence, and the importance of fidelity and openness to others, as well as the primacy of hope.
- **Heidegger, Martin** (1889–1976): German philosopher, generally considered the most significant and influential of the existential thinkers. Earlier work emphasised resolution in the face of anxiety, guilt and death, whilst later work placed greater emphasis on language and an openness towards Being.
- **Sartre, Jean-Paul** (1905–80): French philosopher, novelist, playwright and social critic. Probably the best known existential philosopher, who emphasised the freedom at the heart of human existence and the angst, meaninglessness and nausea that it evokes. Later work shifted towards a more Marxist standpoint.
- **Merleau-Ponty, Maurice** (1907–61): French philosopher, particularly noted for his emphasis on the embodied nature of human existence.
- **Camus, Albert** (1913–60): French novelist and philosopher. Emphasised the absurdity of human existence, but the possibility of creating meaning in a meaningless world.

view also makes it difficult to develop a coherent understanding of existential thinking. For instance, whilst some existential philosophers are deeply religious (such as Kierkegaard, Buber and Marcel), others are

committed atheists (such as Sartre, Nietzsche and Camus). Similarly, whilst some emphasise the need for individuality (such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche), others emphasise the need for relationship (such as Buber, Marcel and Jaspers). And whilst some consider existence to be ultimately meaningless (such as Sartre and Camus), others place great emphasis on the primacy of hope (such as Marcel). One can only speak of existential philosophers in the loosest sense, then, as a group of thinkers – across history – who show some ‘family resemblances’ in their outlook and style of philosophising.

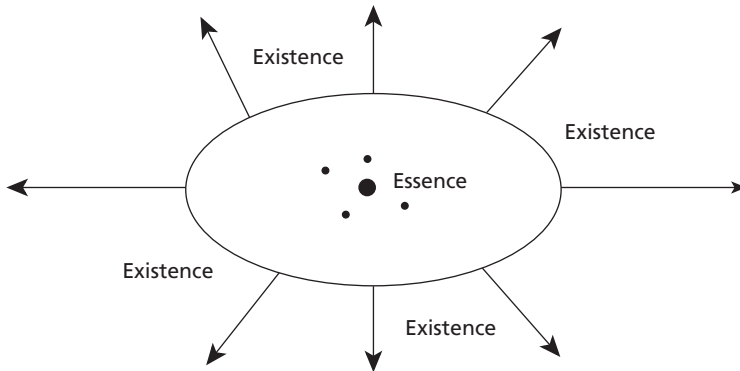
The fact that existential philosophy is a difficult, contradictory and ill-defined field of inquiry, however, is in no way grounds for dismissing it out of hand. Indeed, as a philosophy that emphasises diversity over uniformity, concreteness over abstractness, dilemmas over answers, and subjective truths over grand-encompassing theories, such complexity is the very life-blood of existential philosophy itself. Furthermore, the contemporary trend to summarily dismiss any set of ideas that can not be reduced to sound-bite status is often more a consequence of anxiety in the face of uncertainty than a genuine desire for knowledge. Existential philosophy is difficult to understand, in part, because it is a difficult set of ideas – ideas that challenge our very assumptions about how things are. Indeed, it is difficult to understand because existence itself is difficult to understand! To engage with these ideas, then, requires a willingness to step into an uncertain and dimly-lit world, and to put to one side a need for certainty and quick, easily-digestible answers.

## Existence

What, then, is the family resemblance that all existential philosophers share? A useful starting point is to consider existential philosophy an approach that, as the name suggests, takes as its primary concern the *existence* of human beings (Ellenberger, 1958). To understand this notion of ‘existence’ we can compare it against its traditional counterpart, ‘essence’. The essence of an entity is *what* it is: the universal, abstract and unchanging characteristics that make it one kind of an entity rather than another (Macquarrie, 1972). For instance, we might say that the essence of this book is that it is about existential therapy. By contrast, the existence of an entity is the fact *that* it is, that it has a particular, concrete being. The existence of this book, then, is that it is this particular book that you have in front of you, with all its particular sentences, scribbles in the margins, and coffee stains. This existence is more than a collection of abstract, essential qualities; it is the reality of the actual entity in front of you.

Figure 2.1 is an attempt to diagrammatically represent existence and essence. As this diagram suggests, an entity’s essence is what it is made up of, and one must imagine each of these ‘internal’ essences being

Figure 2.1 Existence and essence



common to a whole range of entities. By contrast, the existence of this entity is how this particular entity manifests itself in its totality: it is the unique way in which this particular entity encounters its world.

Try looking over this book for a minute or two, focusing on its particular concrete existence. If such a way of looking at it seems unusual to you, it is probably because, in our culture, we tend to focus on essences rather than existence. Since the time of Plato (427–347 BC), philosophy has searched for the universal, abstract and unchanging truths that lie behind manifest existence (Macquarrie, 1972). Science, borne from within this tradition, has emerged as the essentialist project *par excellence*, breaking reality down into ever-more fundamental laws and components. Within this essentialist world-view, an entity's existence is little more than a superficial mask that conceals its 'true' reality.

Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this essentialist outlook has become increasingly applied to an understanding of human beings. Positivism, developed by Auguste Comte (1778–1857), proposed that human society and human beings could be understood in terms of their underlying laws and rules (Mautner, 1996). This led to the development of such essentialist psychologies as behaviourism and psychoanalysis, where the concrete individual was broken down into such constitutive parts as stimuli and response, id and superego (for instance, Freud, 1923; Watson, 1925). Similarly, Frederick Hegel (1770–1831), one of the most influential philosophers of the nineteenth century – and to whom much contemporary existential thought is a reaction – developed a philosophical system in which concrete, individual human existences were subsumed within a model of highly abstract and universal processes.

Few existential philosophers have questioned the value of studying inanimate objects in an essentialist, scientific way. What they vigorously

reject, however, is the extension of this outlook to an understanding of human beings. Indeed, some existential philosophers, such as Heidegger (1926/1962), use the term 'existence' to refer solely to human existence. Existential philosophy, then – particularly in its nineteenth and twentieth century form – can be understood as a reaction to philosophical and scientific systems that focus on the universal, abstract and unchanging essences behind concrete human existence that treat particular human beings primarily as members of a genus or instance of universal laws (Guignon, 2002). Such essentialist approaches are rejected because, from an existential perspective, the concrete reality of human existence is irreducible to a set of essential components. That is, even if I could list every one of your essential qualities – for instance, your level of extraversion, your 'Intelligence Quotient', the neurochemicals passing through your brain – I would still not be describing *you*, because the actual, concrete *you* that you are is more than all these essential components put together. Furthermore, from an ethical standpoint, to try and reduce your being down to a set of essential components would be to diminish the fullness of your humanity, to transform you into nothing more than a sophisticated robot or computer. The aim of existential philosophy, then, is to develop a deeper and more complete understanding of this existence – the irreducible, indefinable totality that you, me, and others are.

## **The phenomenological method**

A key contribution to this search has been the phenomenological method, as developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Following in the footsteps of the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1690), Husserl adopted a standpoint of radical doubt, arguing that all we can know is what we experience: the 'inner evidence' that is given to us intuitively in our conscious experiencing of things. In other words, to truly know ourselves and our world, we need to turn our attention to our conscious, lived-experiences. To do so, Husserl outlined a range of methods or 'reductions', starting with the 'phenomenological method', which Spinelli (1989), drawing on Ihde (1986), describes in terms of three interrelated steps. The first of these steps is the rule of 'epoché', whereby we are urged to 'set aside our initial biases and prejudices of things, to suspend our expectations and assumptions, in short, to *bracket* all such temporarily and as far as it is possible so that we can focus on the primary data of our experience' (Spinelli, 1989: 17). In particular, Husserl urges us to set aside our 'natural attitude' – that objects in the external world are objectively present in space and time – and instead focus solely on our immediate and present experiencing of them. It is important to note here that Husserl is not suggesting that we should try to deny, negate or eradicate our assumptions. Rather, he is suggesting that we 'bracket',

'suspend', 'withhold' or 'parenthesise' them, such that we can consider alternate possibilities, and develop a deeper understanding of how we actually experience our world. The second step in the phenomenological method, according to Spinelli (1989), is the 'rule of description', the essence of which is '*Describe, don't explain*' (Ihde, 1986: 34). Here, we are urged to refrain from producing explanations, hypotheses or theories as to what we are experiencing, and instead to stay with the lived-experiences as they actually are. Finally, there is the 'rule of horizontalisation', which 'further urges us to avoid placing any initial hierarchies of significance or importance upon the items of our descriptions, and instead to treat each initially as having equal value or significance' (Spinelli, 1989: 18).

Drawing on this phenomenological method, twentieth century existential philosophers – such as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger (who was an assistant to Husserl) – have all argued that, to understand human existence, we need to put to one side abstract hypotheses, analytical procedures and philosophical theories, and instead focus on human existence as it is actually lived. Indeed, these philosophers are often referred to as 'existential phenomenologists'. There are a number of important differences, however, between an existential philosophical outlook and a Husserlian phenomenological one. First, existential philosophers have rejected the idea that, through the various reductions, we can arrive at a pure consciousness and transcendent ego. Rather, they have argued that human existence is fundamentally and inextricably immersed in its world. Second, existential philosophers have moved away from the Husserlian emphasis on cognitive, conscious processes, to focus on embodied, practical, concrete involvement in the world.

Existential philosophers have also gone on to try and say something about the nature of this concrete human existence. Specifically, they have attempted to describe some of the inescapable, universal features of the human condition, within which each particular human existence resides. (Heidegger uses the term 'ontological' to refer to these universal features of human being, and the term 'ontic' to refer to the activities of each particular human existence within these givens.) Different existential philosophers have emphasised different – and, at times, contrasting – givens of human existence, but there are a number of commonalities across the existential spectrum, and these will be explored in the following sections.

## Existence as unique

One of the characteristics of each human existence that existential philosophers have most consistently pointed to is its uniqueness. Each of us, it is argued, is distinctive, irreplaceable and inexchangeable (Macquarrie, 1972), with a unique potential that we bring into the world. This is an

inevitable corollary of a philosophical outlook that emphasises concrete, particular actualities over shared, universal essences. If, for instance, you and I were understood in terms of such universal characteristics as levels of extraversion or neuroticism (for instance, Goldberg, 1990) then it might emerge that we are relatively similar people. If, however, I am understood as me-writing-this-now, and you are understood as you-reading-this-then, then we are of a qualitatively distinct order.

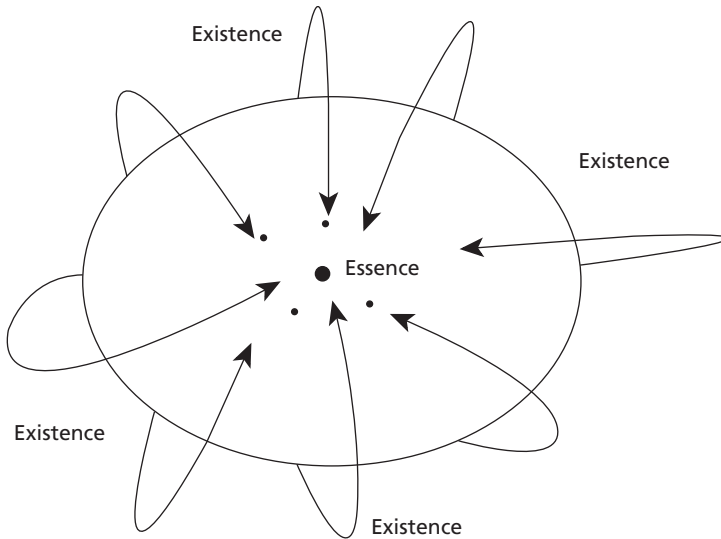
For some existential philosophers, this emphasis on the uniqueness of each human existence is coupled with a highly individualistic outlook. Kierkegaard, often considered one of the most individualistic existential philosophers, held that each person is a solitary being, with no connections to anyone or anything else apart from God (Guignon, 2002). Within every human being there is a 'solitary wellspring' within which God resides, he writes (1846/1992), and he derides those who treat immortality or faith as socially-shared affairs.

On the bases of such writings, it is often assumed that all existential philosophers hold that 'the individual is inexorably alone' (Yalom, 1980: 353). Many existential philosophers, however, hold that the basic state of human existence is to be with-others. As Macquarrie writes, then, there is a 'deep tension to be found among existential philosophers, even sometimes in one and the same philosopher, as they are torn between the individual and communal poles of existence' (1972: 84). As we shall see, this tension is also evident in the contrasting practices of some existential therapists.

## **Existence as verb-like**

Virtually all existential philosophers have also argued that human existence is not a noun-like thing, but a verb-like happening. This is a challenge to the commonly held assumption, derived from a natural science world-view, that human beings are entities alongside other entities in the world: fixed, static, substance-like objects that can be studied in the same way that atoms or tables can (Heidegger, 1926/1962). In contrast, existential philosophers have argued that human existence is fundamentally dynamic in nature, that it is a flux (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962), an unfolding event (Guignon, 1993), a path (Jaspers, 1986) or a process. Indeed, the very word 'exist' comes from the Latin verb *existere*, which means to stand out or emerge (Macquarrie, 1972; May, 1958b). Existence, then, can be conceived of as an upsurge (Sartre, 1943/1958): a becoming, a bursting forth into the world.

A phenomenological exercise may help to illustrate this point. Reflect, for a minute, on what you are experiencing as you read these words. Initially, you may perceive yourself as a thing-like self encountering another thing: this book. If you try to bracket this natural attitude, however, and simply focus on what you are experiencing, you may come to

**Figure 2.2 Existence precedes essence**

see that your experiencing is a reading-of-these-words-now, or a wondering-what-this-is-on-about, rather than a fixed thing encountering another fixed thing.

From an existential perspective, then, we are first and foremost a verb-like being, and it is only subsequently that we may define ourselves as a noun-like thing: such as 'an extrovert' or 'a therapist'. This is the meaning of the well-known Sartrean phrase: 'Existence precedes essence' (1943/1958: 568) (see Figure 2.2). In other words, human beings are not fixed selves, but a relationship towards their own being; or, as Kierkegaard puts it, 'a relation that relates itself to itself' (1849/1980: 13). For Heidegger, too, the essence of human existence is 'self-interpretation' (Dreyfus, 1997). As human beings, we are constantly making sense of ourselves and understanding who we are – even if this is not at a level of reflective self-awareness.

## Existence as freely choosing

At the heart of existential philosophy is also the assertion that human existence is fundamentally free (Macquarrie, 1972). Such an assertion directly challenges the assumption – particularly prevalent amongst scientific psychologies – that human thoughts, feelings and behaviours are determined by a prior set of circumstances or conditions, such as

'unconscious' drives or external stimulus. For existential philosophers, such as Kierkegaard (1844/1980) and Sartre (1943/1958), human existence erupts into the world out of no-thingness, and thereby can not be reduced to a set of determinative causes. From this perspective, freedom is not an add-on to being, but the essence of being itself (Sartre, 1943/1958). Sartre writes: 'Man does not exist *first* in order to be free *subsequently*; there is no difference between the being of a man and his *being-free*' (1943/1958: 25).

Whilst there is no way of empirically demonstrating that human beings are free, phenomenological reflection reveals that such freedom is an integral part of human lived-experience (Guignon, 2000). As you are reading this, for instance, you are unlikely to experience yourself as being impelled by a set of causes to act in a particular way. You are unlikely to feel, for instance, that you are *determined* to turn the page, or *caused* to adopt the particular beliefs outlined in this book. Rather, you are likely to experience yourself as having the possibility of making choices. You may feel, for instance, that you could choose to stop reading this book and make yourself a cup of tea, or tear up the pages of this book and burn them. Of course, you may not want to behave in this way, but *wanting* is a very different notion from being deterministically *impelled* to do one thing or another.

Of all the existential philosophers, it is Sartre (1943/1958) who places the greatest emphasis on human freedom. In asserting that existence precedes essence, he is not only suggesting that we are an upsurge of nothingness prior to any fixed identity, but that 'Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself' (1945/1996: 259). In other words, we *are* our choices: our identity and characteristics are a consequence – and not causes – of the choices that we make. From this perspective, then, there is nothing that caused you to become the person you are: whether you 'are' a therapist, parent or extravert. Rather, you became you by virtue of the choices that you made in your life, and these identities are only an outcome of the decisions that you have made – decisions that are ultimately without any solid ground beneath them.

Sartre also argues that human beings are the creators of their own values: 'My freedom is the unique foundation of values and ... *nothing*, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value' (1943/1958: 38). Not all existential philosophers, however, agree. Marcel (1949), in particular, argued that values are not chosen but *recognised*. In other words, we do not decide to value something in a particular way, but have a direct and immediate intuition of its intrinsic worth. This is a point of view shared by Max Scheler (1874–1928), a prominent phenomenologist, who influenced both Sartre and Heidegger. Scheler drew an analogy between values and colours, arguing that both are directly experienced qualities of things. For instance, just as we immediately intuit that an object is red, so, for Scheler, we immediately intuit whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, valuable or worthless, and so on. Scheler argued that this immediate, intuitive and pre-rational apprehension of values is given in our feelings (Dunlop, 1991), such that we experience happiness when we

intuit pleasantness in a thing, or bliss when we intuit spirituality. The significance of this position will become apparent when we go on to look at the logotherapeutic approach in Chapter 4.

## **Existence as towards-the-future, drawing-on-the-past and in-the-present**

In challenging a causal, deterministic understanding of human beings, existential philosophers – most notably Heidegger (1926/1962) – have also challenged traditional assumptions about the nature and movement of time. In general, we tend to think of past, present and future as three consecutive regions on a time-line, with the present moving imperceptibly from what was to what will be. If we start with how human beings actually experience their world, however, this conceptualisation would no longer seem satisfactory. As you read these words, for instance, your initial experiencing is not something that is past, but something that is in the present. You are reading *these words here*, not the words in the sentence before. In this sense, then, one might say that the present tends to precede the past: existence begins with an eruption in the immediate now, and only subsequently goes back to its prior state of being.

Contrary to popular myth, however, existential philosophers do not ‘begin by isolating man on the instantaneous island of his present’ (Sartre, 1943/1958: 109). Rather, they see existence as inextricably past, present *and* future. Whilst the past, then, is not seen as causing the present, it is still seen as being fundamentally woven into its woof. As you read this sentence, for instance, you do so in the present, yet the way you presently experience it is inextricably related to what you have experienced in the past. Had you been brought up only learning Norwegian, for instance, then your experiencing of these words would be very different: as meaningless blurs. Existence, then, may emerge in the present, but it always ‘takes up’ its own past (Heidegger, 1926/1962).

For Heidegger, however, ‘*Everything begins with the future!*’ (2001: 159). In taking up our past, we do not simply apply it to the present, but use it to act towards future goals, meanings and possibilities. ‘Man first of all,’ writes Sartre, ‘is the being who hurls himself towards a future and who is conscious of imagining himself as being in the future’ (1945/1996: 259). From an existential perspective, then, the basic ground for human action is motives rather than causes (Heidegger, 2001): we pull ourselves from ahead, rather than being pushed from behind. In other words, your reading of this book is not first and foremost something that was caused to be, but something that is orientated towards an end goal, such as achieving a greater knowledge of existential therapy.

Sartre (1943/1958) uses the term ‘projects’ to refer to the kinds of plans that we have for the future, and suggests that they may be of a higher or lower order. The project of reading this book, for instance, may be part of

a higher order project of becoming a better therapist, which might, itself, be part of a higher order project, such as 'contributing to a better society'. As with our freedom, however, Sartre argues that our projects – right up to our highest order, 'original' ones – are ultimately groundless. That is, they have no externally-given, extrinsic foundations: nothing outside of ourselves on which they can be based. In other words, from a Sartrean perspective, our lives have no given, automatic meaning: there are only the meanings that we choose to endow them with. I may decide, for instance, that the meaning of my life is to help others or be happy, but these meanings are not based, or legitimised, by anything outside of myself. Viktor Frankl (1986), founder of logotherapy, likens this self-creation of meaning to the illusion of the Indian Fakir, who throws a rope up into the air and then proceeds to climb up it himself; and, like the Fakir's illusion, both Sartre and Camus (1942/1955) conclude that life is essentially absurd. For them, there is no profound reason for living, for going through the agitation of daily living and suffering. Whilst we strive towards meanings and purposes, there are none to be found – only those that we have created ourselves out of nothing. This leads Camus to state that: 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy' (1942/1955: 11). Later on in this chapter, we will see how Camus attempts to answer this question.

It should be noted again, however, that not all existential philosophers share this belief. For Marcel, for instance, the hope that there is an order and integrity to the universe is 'oxygen for the soul' (Blackham, 1961), and not something to be disparaged. Buber, too, emphasises the fact that, in the presence of a Thou (see below), there is an inexpressible confirmation and assurance of meaning, such that 'The question about the meaning of life is no longer there' (1923/1958: 140). We will come back to this viewpoint when we look at the logotherapeutic approach in Chapter 4.

## **Existence as limited**

Whilst existential philosophers argue that human beings are fundamentally free to choose their own future, it would be wrong to assume that they see human beings as free to do whatever they want. Indeed, existential philosophers have consistently emphasised the fact that human freedom is 'hedged in' in innumerable ways (Macquarrie, 1972), and an understanding of the limits of human existence is as important to existential philosophers as an understanding of its freedom. For Kierkegaard (1849/1980), both 'possibility' and 'necessity' are intrinsic aspects of our existence, and the 'mirror of possibility' alone reflects only half the truth. Similarly, for Jaspers (1986), human existence runs up against numerous 'limit-situations' – such as death, suffering, struggle and guilt – which can not be transcended, avoided or resolved.

Heidegger (1926/1962) and Sartre (1945/1996) use the term 'facticity' to designate the limiting factors of existence (Macquarrie, 1972). The factual is the given, and some of the factual aspects of human existence have already been examined in this chapter: such as the fact that we are free. From an existential perspective, for instance, we cannot choose not to be free: even if we choose not to choose, we are still making a choice. Facticity also refers to the fact that we always find ourselves in a particular concrete situation. For instance, right now I am surrounded by a computer, a desk, a phone and walls, none of which are of my making, and all of which limit my freedom in some way. I can not just walk through the space where the wall is to get directly to my kitchen. My freedom is bounded in a very real way.

Heidegger (1926/1962) uses the term 'thrownness' to refer to the fact that existence, right from its very start, finds itself thrown into a particular factual situation that is not of its making. We did not choose, for instance, to be born to our particular parents, nor did we choose the particular social, historical and cultural context in which we emerged. The term thrownness also refers to the fact that, like the throwing of a dice, there is no reason why we should find ourselves emerging in one particular situation rather than another (Macquarrie, 1972).

From an existential perspective, then, we do not determine the beginning of our existence; and neither do we determine its end. Death, as Heidegger (1926/1962) and other existential philosophers have emphasised, is the inescapable, immovable boundary at the end of our lives. Like a road block beyond which we can not pass, it brings to an end all our projects and possibilities. It is the 'congealing point of existence' (Jaspers, 1932), which summarises and completes our being. For Heidegger, this death is of particular importance because of his emphasis on being as being-towards-the-future. Hence, for Heidegger, our being is a being-towards-death. In this respect, death is not only an unavoidable event at some point in our future, but an intrinsic component of our every moment of being.

Thrownness and death, then, are like two bookends on either side of existence – boundaries that our freedom and choice cannot extend beyond – and circumscribing these two boundaries is the boundary condition of chance (Jaspers, 1932). There is no reason why we are thrown into our particular beginnings, often no reason why we meet our particular end, and, in between, we are constantly encircled by a 'huge tide of accident'. Opportunities come to us or evade us in ways that are beyond our control: a chance meeting sets the beginnings of a life-long relationship; we lose our job because of a fall in shares on the Tokyo stock market; cells mutate in our body and we are afflicted with cancer.

From an existential perspective, then, we can not fully control our beginnings, our endings, or much of what happens in between, but what we can choose is how we *face* these ontological limitations. Even a person who is imprisoned, writes Sartre (1943/1958), is free to decide whether to

stay put or to try and escape. Even if we might say, then, that human existence is constricted like a rat in a cage, this is very different from saying that a human being *is* a cage: that it is fixed and determined without any possibility of movement and choice.

## Existence as in-the-world

Whilst earlier existential philosophers tended to emphasise the individuality and aloneness of each human being, later existential thinkers – most notably Heidegger (1926/1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) – have emphasised the in-the-worldness of human existence. '[T]here is no inner man,' writes Merleau-Ponty, 'man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself' (1945/1962: xi). In other words, existence is not located *within* the individual, but *between* the individual and their world. Indeed, Heidegger uses the term *Dasein* – literally translated as 'being-there' – to refer to the specifically human form of being; and, at other times, writes of the hyphenated 'being-in-the-world' to emphasise the indissoluble unity of person and world. In other words, he is suggesting that your reading-these-words-here is not something that takes place in your head, but between you and the words on this page: it is located on the inter-worldly, rather than intrapersonal, plane. Such an assertion is a radical challenge to another pervasive assumption within Western culture: that we can talk about human beings in isolation from their context.

The roots of this philosophical standpoint can be found in the phenomenological concept of intentionality, which proposes that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something (Spinelli, 1989). My awareness is always directed to something outside of myself – whether real or imagined – and if my conscious existence is my very being, then those external entities are a fundamental part of who I am. Heidegger (1926/1962) developed this standpoint by arguing that in our everyday existence we are constantly appropriating objects and tools without being aware of them as separate entities. As I write these words, for instance, I am not experiencing my computer as something that is separate from me: at the level of existence, it is a fundamental part of my very being. Only when it goes wrong do I then experience it as something distinct: as *that* useless pile of plastic and silicone. Hence, if my very being is my concrete doing, then these objects within the world are a primordial part of my existence.

In his later writings, Heidegger moved away from an understanding of human beings as the manipulators of their world, and towards an understanding of human beings as the 'custodians', 'guardians' or 'shepherds' of Being as a whole (1947/1996). That is, *Dasein* is like the guardian of a clearing in the forest, where the Being of the world can be seen for what it is; or like an 'aperture' in which the truth of Being can be revealed. From this perspective, man is not the 'Lord of Being' but its servant, who is

entrusted with the most dignified of tasks: of bringing the truth of Being to light. This notion of human being as an openness to the world is of particular importance to the Daseinsanalytic school of existential therapy, which will be examined in Chapter 3.

## Existence as with-others

Along with arguing that human existence is fundamentally in-the-world, later existential philosophers have also argued that human existence is fundamentally with-others. This philosophical position – generally referred to as an ‘intersubjective’ one (Crossley, 1996) – further challenges the dominant Western belief that human beings are separate and distinct identities. It proposes that each of our existences is fundamentally and primordially intertwined with the existences of others.

Heidegger’s (1926/1962) account of this intertwining is rooted in the fact that the way we appropriate entities in the world is based on public – rather than private – understandings. The way I type on my computer, for instance, is not something that I determined alone, but is based on how my culture has deemed it appropriate to type: for instance, with ten fingers, putting spaces between words and so on. Indeed, the very language that I use to write this book is not something that I have evolved independently, but is acquired from my socio-cultural nexus. If, then, my very existence is a typing-these-words-here, it is fundamentally infused with the being of those others, and can never slip out of its cultural context.

On this basis, Heidegger (1926/1962), like Sartre (1943/1958), argues that our existence is fundamentally contingent and groundless. By this, Heidegger means that our being-in-the-world is not rooted in some personal truth or reality, but in interpretations that are public and non-specific to us (Dreyfus, 1997). We are, as Dreyfus puts it, ‘interpretation all the way down’ (1997: 25): our very being is permeated by social, generic, impersonal understandings. Heidegger refers to these understandings as the world of ‘the they’ or ‘the One’.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted here, however, that Heidegger is not simply talking about a tendency to conform. Rather, he is saying that we are fundamentally and unavoidably infused with the being of others. In other words, the way that we play sports, the way we talk to each other, the way that we relate to our children are all grounded in a socially-constructed nexus of meanings and interpretations that are not solely of our making.

Heidegger (1926/1962) also presents some preliminary ideas about concrete relationships with others, and identifies two particular modes of relating: ‘leaping in’ and ‘leaping ahead’. ‘Leaping in’ involves taking over the other person’s concerns and projects for them, and handing them back the task when it has been completed, or disburdening them of it altogether. In such relating, writes Heidegger, ‘the Other can become one

who is dominated and dependent, even if this domination is a tacit one and remains hidden from him' (1926/1962: 158). For him, this is the most prevalent form of relating to others. By contrast, in 'leaping ahead' we help the other to do things for themselves, to address their own concerns and projects (1926/1962: 159). For Heidegger, such a form of relating helps the other to open up to their possibilities for being, and to exist in a more authentic manner (see below). This distinction is of clear relevance to the practice of therapy, and is particularly emphasised by the Daseinsanalytic approach (see Chapter 3).

Of all the existential philosophers, however, it is Buber (1923/1958) who examines concrete relationships with others in most detail. Like Heidegger (1926/1962), Buber holds that the I is always in relation to an Other, but he makes a fundamental distinction between 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' attitudes to this Other. In the I-It attitude, the other is experienced as a thing-like, determined object: an entity that can be systematised, analysed and broken down into universal parts. We might perceive the Other, for instance, as a neurotic whose adult ego is constantly threatened by their unconscious drives. By contrast, in the I-Thou attitude, we behold, accept and confirm the other as a unique, un-classifiable and un-analysable totality: as a freely-choosing flux of human experiencing. For Buber, such an I-Thou attitude requires a meeting with the Other as they are in the present, rather than in terms of our past assumptions or future needs. It is an opening out to the Other in their actual otherness – and a loving 'confirmation' of that otherness – rather than a self-reflexive encounter with our own stereotypes and desires. Buber also argues that such an I-Thou attitude requires the I to take the risk of entering itself fully in to the encounter: to leap into the unpredictability of a genuine dialogue with all of its being – including its vulnerabilities – and to be open to the possibility of being fundamentally transformed by the encounter. Buber is not talking here about a merging with the Other – we cannot encounter what we are – nor is he suggesting that we can, or should, always relate to others in an I-Thou way. What he is suggesting, though, is that we have the potentiality of experiencing moments of deep I-Thou connection with Others; and we shall explore the relevance of this assertion to therapy later on in the book.

For Sartre (1943/1958), too, human existence is inextricably social; yet, in contrast to Buber (1923/1958), he tends to see relationships as inevitably 'it-ifying'. For Sartre, the 'look' of the other constantly threatens to turn the I into an object, into a fixed thing that is devoid of freedom and possibilities. Suppose, for instance, that as you are reading this book, you become aware that someone is standing behind you, observing your every movement. Now, instead of experiencing yourself as a 'reading-this-book', you become aware of yourself as an object to this person's gaze: a thing with such characteristics as sloppy posture or unkempt hair. In attempting to defend ourselves against such objectification, Sartre

suggests that human beings may try to objectify the other instead, and get locked in a battle of objectify-or-be-objectified. For Sartre, such a struggle becomes even more complex in loving relationships, where we want to possess the love of another, yet want this love to be freely given. It is of little value, for instance, to know that someone loves us because they *have* to, yet it can be equally frustrating to feel that someone else's love is beyond our control. For Sartre, then, relationships are almost inevitably frustrating, unfulfilling and conflict-ridden. 'Hell,' he famously suggests, 'is other people'. This perspective is of particular importance when we go on to look at Laing's description of interpersonal relationships in Chapter 6.

## Existence as embodied

Many existential philosophers, most notably Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), have also emphasised the fundamentally-embodied nature of human existence. That is, we are inextricably bodily beings, we *are* our bodies, and it is only through our bodies that we can engage with, encounter and 'rise towards' our world. This can be illustrated through phenomenological reflection. If you focus on what you are experiencing as you read this, you will become aware that it has an ineradicably bodily dimension. For instance, you may notice that you experience a slight straining at the side of your eyes, or a gnawing in the pit of your stomach. You will also become aware that these bodily experiences cannot be entirely separated off from your 'mental' experiences: at every moment, your experiencing has the quality of a psycho-somatic whole. Such a standpoint, then, challenges the traditional Cartesian assumption that mind and body are qualitatively distinct entities, and that the former is in some way superior to the latter.

Indeed, existential philosophers, such as Heidegger (1926/1962) have argued that the very way we *understand* our world is embodied. As you read this chapter, for instance, you will be intellectually processing these words; but you will also be experiencing them in a bodily-felt way. For instance, you may experience feelings of excitement in response to some of these ideas, or frustration in response to others. From a traditional, Cartesian standpoint – one that puts mind over body – such bodily-felt experiences are little more than secondary, irrational responses; but from an existential perspective, our bodily-felt experiences are an immediate, direct and intuitive apprehension of our world that may precede our intellectual grasp. Rather than being derivative, then, they can be considered 'equiprimordial' (of equal priority); and rather than being considered merely irrational, they can be considered of equal validity to our intellectual understandings. Indeed, as Nietzsche writes: 'There is more wisdom in the body than in thy deepest learnings' (1883/1967: 71).

The idea that we apprehend our world in a direct and bodily way leads Heidegger (1926/1962) to state that we are always 'in a mood'. By this, he

does not mean that we are always grumpy or irritable, but that human existence is intrinsically *attuned* to its world. Furthermore, these moods – as immediate, intuitive ways of recognising particular facts (Warnock, 1970) – give us vital access to the truth of our being (Guignon, 2002).

## **Existence as anxious**

Of all the moods that can help us recognise the truth of our being, existential philosophers – most notably Heidegger (1926/1962) and Kierkegaard (1844/1980) – have placed particular emphasis on anxiety. Whilst it may seem that existing as a unique, no-thing-like, freely-choosing happening is relatively agreeable, existential philosophers have argued that such a being-ness brings with it profound feelings of dread and angst – particularly the fact that we are freely choosing beings. '[F]reedom's possibility announces itself in anxiety', writes Kierkegaard (1844/1980: 74); and he goes on to argue that the more someone acknowledges and acts on their freedom, the more they will experience angst.

Why should this be the case? First, as Yalom puts it, 'alternatives exclude' (2001: 148). In choosing one thing, I am always choosing against something else, and there is always the possibility that I will choose against the better alternative. In choosing to study existential therapy, for instance, I am choosing against studying psychodynamic therapy or Gestalt therapy, and there is always the possibility that the other alternatives would have been preferable. For Sartre (1943/1958), what makes these choices particularly serious is the fact that I not only choose for myself, but for others as well. If, for instance, I decide to quit my job, then my partner and children are implicated in that decision – as are my colleagues and my students. Hence, whilst I, alone, am responsible for my decisions, I carry a responsibility to the rest of the world on my shoulders. No wonder, then, that Sartre describes human beings as 'condemned', rather than 'blessed', to be free.

From an existential perspective, what further exacerbates this anxiety is the fact that we have nothing solid on which to base these choices. As Sartre (1943/1958) argues, we have no fixed identity, no given meanings to guide us – or on which we can blame our choices. Like a person lost in the jungle, we are forced to cut our own path through life, with no directing signs or maps to point us in the right direction. Indeed, from a Heideggerian (1926/1962) perspective, the most fundamental anxiety comes from a realisation that all those signs and maps that we thought were givens are ultimately only socially agreed conventions. With a flash of dread, we realise that all those activities we assumed were intrinsically meaningful – the way we do our jobs, the way we treat our friends, the way we think and write – have no ultimate grounding, and could easily be other. It is as if we suddenly realise that our whole world is nothing but

a theatre stage and we are merely playing a part: absorbed in a world of empty constructs and roles that only give the illusion of some ultimate meaning-motivating action (Dreyfus, 1997).

From an existential perspective, however, is not only freedom and nothingness that brings with it anxiety, but also the fact that our existence runs up against unmovable boundaries, such as death and chance. Indeed, it is only because of these boundaries that our choices are infused with angst. If, for instance, I could train in every psychotherapeutic discipline, I would not worry about choosing existential therapy over gestalt therapy. But because my life – and finances – is finite, a choice for one thing means a choice against something else. In other words, anxiety is the ‘dizziness of freedom’ (Kierkegaard, 1844/1980: 61) in the face of limitations.

## Existence as guilty

For Heidegger (1926/1962), freedom not only brings with it anxiety, but also guilt. Here, Heidegger is not using ‘guilt’ in the traditional sense of having wronged others, but in the sense of having wronged oneself: of having failed to fulfil one’s ownmost potential. (Yalom (1980) suggests that we might think of such existential guilt as ‘regret’ or ‘remorse’.) For Heidegger, such guilt is unavoidable. As we have seen, in making choices we are always excluding certain alternatives, such that we are always in debt to ourselves for not carrying out all our possibilities in life. In other words, we always lag behind who we might have been. In choosing to follow an academic path, for instance, I renounced the possibility of developing my skills as a journalist. Such a possibility continues to haunt me: perhaps I could have been the editor of *Time Magazine* by now – I will never know. From an existential perspective, however, one thing is certain: were I the editor of *Time Magazine*, I would still be experiencing guilt about something else, such as my failure to actualise my teaching potential.

## Existence as inauthentic

From an existential perspective, then, anxiety and guilt – as well as other ‘negative’ feelings, such as dread, despair, unsettledness and a sense of absurdity – are responses to the reality of our human condition. It is also argued, however, that few of us welcome the emergence of such feelings. Rather, we try to quell them; and we do so by turning a blind eye to the reality of our existence, pretending to ourselves that things are other than they really are. Heidegger (1926/1962) refers to such self-relating as ‘inauthentic’, whilst Sartre (1943/1958) writes of ‘self-deception’ or ‘bad faith’.

At the heart of such self-deception is a denial of our freedom and responsibility, and we may do this in a number of ways. Supposing, for

instance, that in the midst of my annual diet I am visited by a friend who brings with him a large bar of chocolate. I am then faced with a choice: do I eat some of the chocolate and undermine my diet, or do I commit myself to spending the whole evening staring longingly at it? One strategy that I may adopt to attenuate the anxiety that this choice evokes is to turn myself into a 'thing' (Sartre, 1943/1958). For instance, I may tell myself that I am 'someone with no will-power', such that the eating of the chocolate becomes a *fait accompli*. Alternatively, I may tell myself that I am 'a committed dieter', such that there is no chance of me eating the chocolate. Either way, by turning myself into a object-like thing, I am denying the reality that, at that point in time, I am entirely free to choose how I behave and am neither compelled to behave in one way or the other.

If I subsequently eat the chocolate, I may then adopt a number of strategies to deny my responsibility for doing so. For instance, I may blame my friend for bringing the chocolate around; or I may blame it on some unconscious, inner urge: 'I just couldn't stop myself'. Adhering to an ideology or dogma may be another form of denying my true freedom and responsibility. I might say to myself, for instance, that inner desires should always be followed – such that there is no question of choice whenever they emerge.

From an existential perspective, another means of denying the freedom and responsibility that I, as an individual, hold, is by falling in with the crowd. I might think to myself, for instance, that if my friend is eating the chocolate, then it is probably best if I do the same. That way, I do not need to think for myself, but can simply adhere to the behaviours and values of others. For Heidegger (1926/1962), the essence of inauthenticity is such a falling in with the world of 'the One', but it is important to remember here that he is not simply talking about conforming. Rather, he means the tendency to fall in with the socially agreed nexus of meanings, and to take them as givens, rather than realising their fragileness and contingency. It is not just a question, then, of me eating the chocolate as my friend is doing; rather, it is my falling in with the whole world of dieting, and the fact that I do not question whether being thin is really so meaningful. I have simply assumed I should try to lose weight, rather than questioning the whole validity of this cultural assumption. Here, it is important to note that, for Heidegger, we do not start off as true to ourselves and only later become inauthentic. Rather, from his perspective, we are primordially fallen into the social world, and can only subsequently start to gain some distance from it.

Self-deception may also involve trying to deny the given restrictions and limitations of our lives. I know, for instance, that my friend's chocolate bar is enormously high in calories, but I may try to pretend to myself that things really aren't quite so fixed. I might say to myself, for instance, that it's probably a relatively low-calorie chocolate, or that the peanuts in it reduce the calorific intake. In terms of denying the givens, Heidegger

(1926/1962) puts particular emphasis on the way that we tend to deny our impending demise. We talk of death, for instance, as something that only happens to other people; or we paint the faces of the deceased for funeral viewings, such that we can pretend death is a peaceful state of slumber, rather than the complete absence of all existence (Farber, 2000). Indeed, for Sartre (1943/1958) bad faith is ultimately a continual slippage between a wholly deterministic understanding of our being and a wholly volitional one. We veer from seeing ourselves as totally determined to seeing ourselves as totally free, such that we can never get pinned down to the anxiety-evoking reality of our being: that we are free to choose within a given set of limitations.

From an existential perspective, then, human beings have a tendency to try and hide from the reality of their existence; but, they argue, we pay a heavy price for such self-deception. For philosophers like Heidegger (1926/1962) and Sartre (1943/1958), when we deny our freedom and responsibility, we also deny our possibility of freely choosing towards our own future, and actualising our ownmost potentiality for being. Instead of developing our unique possibilities, we become 'levelled down': 'dispersed' within a public world that reduces everything down to a bland, uniform averageness. Here, we lose the possibility of a life infused with passion, creativity and vitality, and instead become deadened, domesticated, tranquillised and alienated from ourselves (Guignon, 2002). In essence, we live only half a life rather than a full one. Moreover, because we are not engaging with life as it really is, we are less capable of meeting the challenges and givens that will inevitably confront us. And finally, because the reality of our existence does not go away, the defences that we erect to protect ourselves against it will inevitably falter. Here, existential anxiety and guilt become neurotic anxiety and guilt (Tillich, 1952/2000), and we will explore these processes more fully in Chapter 5.

## Existence as authentic

How, then, can we forge a life that is intense, passionate and whole? In moving towards a more authentic way of being, Heidegger (1926/1962), like many other existential philosophers, has emphasised the importance of adopting an attitude of courage and resolve: a willingness to 'stand naked in the storm of life' (Becker, 1973: 86). In particular, it has been argued that we need to be willing to face our anxiety. For Kierkegaard, the courageous person does not shrink back when anxiety announces itself, 'and still less does he attempt to hold it off with noise and confusion; but he bids it welcome, greets it festively, and like Socrates who raised the poisoned cup, he shuts himself up with it and says as a patient would say to the surgeon when the painful operation is about to begin: Now I am ready' (1844/1980: 156).

Through facing up to such anxiety, we are 'jerked' out of our pseudosecurities – out of our absorption in pseudo-familiar tranquillity (Macquarrie, 1972: 131) – and summoned to face our ownmost freedom and possibilities (Heidegger, 1926/1962: 232). In this respect, then, anxiety – at least of the existential sort – is not irrational or a sign of pathology, but a teacher and guide. 'Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way', writes Kierkegaard, 'has learned the ultimate'; and he goes on to state that 'the more profoundly he is in anxiety, the greater is the man' (1844/1980: 155). In the example of choosing whether or not to eat the chocolate, then, adopting an attitude of resolve means putting to one side attempts to attenuate my anxiety. It means acknowledging the fact that this is a difficult decision for me: that I really do want to stick to my diet *and* have an enjoyable evening. It also means, however, being willing to leap into one choice or the other despite the anxiety – of committing myself to a particular path in the knowledge that it may not be the right one.

In this respect, an attitude of resolve also involves courageously facing one's existential guilt. As we have seen, to some extent, we will always experience a sense of guilt over our unfulfilled possibilities, but the more that we hide from our freedom and potentiality, the more this sense of guilt will grow. For Heidegger (1926/1962), this guilt is revealed to us in the call of our 'conscience': 'an abrupt arousal' that calls us back to ourselves, that reminds us of our debt to our own being. It is a summons – albeit a silent one – out of our lostness in the One. And although, for Heidegger, we can never entirely stand outside of the nexus of social meanings, we can 'choose to choose' which social practices and possibilities we take up, rather than blindly falling in with Others. Like existential anxiety, then, existential guilt is not considered a negative experience, but a mentor on the path towards greater freedom. 'The more profoundly guilt is discovered,' writes Kierkegaard, 'the greater the genius' (1844/1980: 109).

Existential philosophers have also argued that an authentic self-relational stance involves resolutely facing the fact that there are no ultimate grounds for our projects, meanings and interpretations. This is not to suggest, however, that we should adopt a nihilistic or hopeless attitude towards life. As Camus (1942/1955) states, we can still live and create in the very midst of a desert. A resolute attitude, then, means committing ourselves to projects *despite* their absurdity. It involves 'a decisive dedication to what we want to accomplish for our lives. And our stance towards the future is that of "anticipation" or "forward-directedness": a clear-sighted and unwavering commitment to those overriding aims taken as definitive of one's existence as a whole' (Guignon, 1993: 229). Camus likens this commitment-in-absurdity to the activities of the mythological Sisyphus, who is condemned by the Greek gods to ceaselessly roll a rock to the top of a mountain, whereupon the stone falls back under its own weight. Sisyphus's task is absurd, unceasingly meaningless, and yet he does

not falter or give up. 'The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart', writes Camus (1942/1955: 111); and he suggests that, through being conscious of his fate, Sisyphus gains a strength and dignity, such that he can descend the mountain in joy as well as sorrow.

In adopting a more authentic self-relational stance, Heidegger (1926/1962) also puts particular emphasis on resolutely facing our mortality. Here, however, he is not suggesting that we should be broody or pessimistic, but that we should live every day in the knowledge that we are moving towards an inevitable – and indeterminable – ending. For him, it is through such an acknowledgement that we can make the most of our days: it is as if we darken the background behind our existences such that the foreground of our being comes to light more fully. To know that our existences may end at any moment also means that we can not continually defer our choices and projects. It means that we must get on with life. Furthermore, in acknowledging our beingness-towards-death, we are lifted above the world of the One; for, according to Heidegger, our being-towards-death is the one journey that we must take alone. No one can die for us, no public body or group of friends can protect us from our inevitable demise (Hoffman, 1993), and no-one else can draw together the totality of our lives in the face of this final ending. Hence, through acknowledging that we are on an individual and unique journey towards death, we also come to realise the individuality of our lives, and with it the possibility of actualising our ownmost potential.

In striving towards a more authentic way of being, many other existential philosophers have also emphasised the importance of distancing ourselves from 'the crowd'. For Kierkegaard (1846/1992) our true and highest task is to be a single individual: to turn towards ourselves, to think for ourselves, and find truth in aloneness rather than in 'chumminess with others'. This authentic individual, for Kierkegaard, has a great love of, and need for, solitude, and he compares him to those "'Utterly superficial nonpersons and group people"' who experience 'such a meagre need for solitude that, like lovebirds, they promptly die the moment they have to be alone' (1849/1980: 64). For Kierkegaard, then, 'Everyone should be chary about having dealings with "others" and should essentially speak only with God and with himself' (quoted in Buber, 1947: 208). Similarly, for Nietzsche, 'the one essential for the morally adult man is to create his own values and reject the stock morality of his group' (Warnock, 1970). To be authentic is to be true to one's own ideals, values and beliefs rather than those of 'the herd'.

## **Towards otherness**

For some existential philosophers (such as Sartre, 1943/1958), authenticity tends to end here: with a commitment to one's own projects and

possibilities in the face of absurdity. As we have seen, however, for many philosophers of existence, such as Buber (1923/1958), human existence is not a self-contained phenomenon, but something that reaches out beyond its own being. From this standpoint, then, to exist authentically is to acknowledge and actualise one's connectedness with something – or someone – beyond one's own self.

For Kierkegaard, for instance, resolutely facing one's anxiety and withdrawing from the crowd were not ends in themselves, but first – albeit essential – steps on a journey towards an authentic relationship with God (Macquarrie, 1972). Tillich (1952/2000), too, highlights the possibility of moving beyond self-acceptance towards acceptance by a transcendent other; and, like Kierkegaard, challenges traditional conceptions of faith and God. For Tillich, absolute faith is not a belief in some kind of concrete, ego-like patriarch – or what Kierkegaard calls a 'super-father Christmas' (1849/1980: 123) – rather, it is an openness to 'the God above the God of theism' (Tillich, 1952/2000: 186). Tillich describes this God above Gods as a kind of acceptance or forgiveness, a transcendence that can not be demonstrated or proved. For him, then, absolute faith is the 'acceptance of acceptance without somebody or something that accepts' (1952/2000: 185): it is an openness to being accepted and forgiven, even though one cannot identify the source of that unconditional love.

Another philosopher of existence who has placed great emphasis on the transcendence of the self towards God is Buber. In direct contrast to Kierkegaard, however, Buber (1947) argues that the way to God is not through renouncing relationships with others, but through developing closer and more intimate interpersonal relationships. For Buber, God is the 'eternal Thou', the 'Centre' where the 'extended lines of relation' meet (1923/1958: 99); hence, in developing and maintaining I-Thou relationships with other human beings, he suggests that we have an imminent and immediate experience of God. Buber argues, then, that 'the inmost growth of the self is not accomplished, as people like to suppose today, in man's relation to himself, but in the relation between one and the other' (1965/1988: 61).

For Marcel (1949) – whose brand of existential philosophy shares many similarities to Buber's – such a reciprocal relationship of presence also requires a *fidelity* to the Other: a faith in the presence of an other-than-me to which I respond, and to which I continue to respond (Blackham, 1961). For Marcel, such fidelity is 'like the faithful following, through darkness, of a light by which we have been guided and which is no longer visible to us directly' (1949: 72). It is an unwavering loyalty to the other, whether human or supra-human. For Marcel, such fidelity also involves an 'availability' to the other: a being at the 'disposal' of the Other when they are in pain or in need; and a 'receptivity' to the Other: in the sense that one might actively receive a guest. Marcel writes that such an understanding of human existence and relating is a way out of the 'extravagantly

dogmatic negativism which is common to Sartre, to Heidegger and even to Jaspers' (1949: 65), in that it forms the basis for a genuine hope. Through loving and being loved by something outside of myself, my existence no longer feels superfluous, but 'upheld', 'willed' and 'justified'.

In his later writings, Heidegger also emphasises the importance of an openness to something beyond the self – an emphasis which balances his earlier focus on resolve (van Deurzen, 1998). For him, however, this something is not God, but Being itself. Human beings, as we have seen him suggest, are the 'shepherds' of Being (1947/1996); in his later writings, he outlines a stance by which Daseins can authentically fulfil this role. This is an attitude of *Gelassenheit*, which might be translated as a stance of 'abandonment' or 'releasement' towards things (Macquarrie, 1972). It is a non-manipulative, non-imposing way of letting things be what they are, an openness to the Being of beings, a meditative 'letting-oneself-into-nearness of Being' (Heidegger, 1959/1966). Such a way of being accords with a meditative form of thinking: a waiting upon thoughts to come, rather than a wilful generation of ideas and representations. It is also a form of thinking characterised by composure, calmness and concern – a slowing down of pace – and contrasts with 'calculative', scientific thinking, which manipulates its world and races from one idea to the next.

## **The tensions, dilemmas and paradoxes of existence**

From the preceding sections, one might conclude that existential philosophers have proposed an essentially linear view of human development: that human beings, fallen into a world of inauthenticity and alienation, have the possibility of recovering themselves through an attitude of resolve and openness to others. In many respects, however, existential philosophy arose as a reaction to those modernist narratives – most notably Hegel's philosophical system – that place human beings, both collectively and individually, on an ever-forward-moving path. From an existential perspective, life is not a unidirectional process; rather, it is caught in a web of manifold tensions. There is, for instance, the tension between freedom and limitations, between self and others, between the I-Thou and the I-It (Buber, 1923/1958), and between hope and despair (Marcel, 1949). Furthermore, at the heart of an existential outlook is the assertion that there are no intrinsically 'right' answers. Rather, there is only a constant pull from one side to the other. Such tensions are paradoxes: contradictions that cannot be overcome. Jaspers calls these 'antinomies' and writes that 'They are not resolved but only exacerbated by clear thinking, and solutions can only be finite, can resolve only particular conflicts in existence, while a look at the whole will always show the limiting insolubilities' (1932: 218).

Ultimately, even authenticity and inauthenticity can be seen as two poles of a dilemma, neither of which are intrinsically 'better'. Heidegger (1926/1962) explicitly rejects the idea that a moral judgement is associated with either of these terms, as well as the idea that authenticity is some kind of goal that we can attain. Rather, as Moran (2000) suggests, authenticity is probably best understood as something that we may have moments of: for we can never stand naked in anxiety for more than a flash of time before falling back into a more comfortable and protected state of being (Tillich, 1952/2000). From an existential perspective, then, authenticity should not be perceived as the end-point of some linear journey, like the summit of a mountain that we can reach and rest upon. Rather, as in Camus's (1942/1955) myth of Sisyphus, it is probably better understood as those moments of insight and awareness in which we face up to the reality of our condition and possibilities, before falling back in to the world of everyday understandings and practices.

## Critical perspectives

Criticising existential philosophy, as a whole, is not an easy task because of the great diversity of existential viewpoints. As Macquarrie writes, 'Criticisms that may be very much to the point as regards some form of existentialism miss the mark when extended to others' (1972: 219). Nevertheless, a number of general criticisms have been – and can be – made.

First, there would seem to be something of a contradiction between the anti-essentialist starting point of existential philosophy, and its attempts to describe the characteristics of human existence. Specifically, 'if each individual existent is unique and can not be regarded as a specimen of a class, how can one generalise about human existence, as a philosophy of existence seems compelled to do?' (Macquarrie, 1972: 55). To suggest, for instance, that human existence is a being-towards-death (Heidegger, 1926/1962) would seem to be putting universal statements about human existence before the concrete individuality of each unique human existence. Macquarrie counters this critique by suggesting that what existential philosophers are describing here is not the *properties* of human existence, but their *possibilities*. In other words, existential philosophers have not attempted to reduce human existence *down* to a set of finite, essential characteristics, but rather to build it *up* through outlining some of the interwoven layers of human complexity. There is no suggestion, then, that existence is 'nothing but' being-towards-death, embodied and so on. Rather, existential philosophers have suggested that existence is an embodied-anxious-being-towards-death, *ad infinitum*. Furthermore, as Boss (1963) points out, these characteristics of human existence are not seen as being abstract-able from the human context: something that can float on a metaphysical realm of their own, like an IQ or an ego. Rather, they are inextricably bound to the factually observable, concrete behaving

human being. Nevertheless, there is an undeniable tension within existential philosophy between the emphasis on universal characteristics, and the emphasis on unique, personal ones, and this is something that also arises in the existential approaches to therapy.

This leads on to the identification of a second contradiction that is apparent in some of the earlier, more proselytising, existential writings. On the one hand, there is the invitation to turn away from the crowd and towards one's 'innermost truths' (for instance, Kierkegaard, 1846/1992); yet such an invitation, in itself, would seem to be an admonishment to follow a particular path. Neither Kierkegaard nor Nietzsche were blind to this contradiction, and Nietzsche specifically implored people to find their own way rather than following his. Nevertheless, in the writings of some existential philosophers, there would seem to be scant respect for those who choose a life of conformity, passionlessness or obedience.

A third criticism frequently levelled at existential philosophy is that it is essentially amoral (Macquarrie, 1972). In emphasising human freedom, the self-creation of values and the lack of any absolutes, it has been argued that existential thought is an ethic-less, 'anything goes' philosophy in which values such as justice, equality and beneficence can no longer be privileged over their opposites. Heidegger's well-documented flirtation with Nazism in the 1930s does much to reinforce these concerns about the morality of existential philosophy; although it must be remembered that many other existential philosophers, such as Sartre and Camus, took an active stand against fascism. In responding to these charges of amorality, however, it can be argued that the very foundations of existential philosophy are ethical ones: that human beings should be seen and treated as human beings, and not as a collection of bit-parts or deterministic mechanisms.

A fourth criticism of existential philosophy is that it is overly-morbid: that it tends to focus on such experiences as despair, anxiety, guilt and a facing up to death, to the neglect of more positive and pleasurable experiences. As Schrader writes: 'Some readers have concluded that to be an existentialist one needs simply to accentuate in a rather brooding way the darker side of life and cosmologize his anguish' (1967: 13). As we have seen, however, some existential philosophers have written about the more positive moods, such as joy and hope (for instance, Marcel, 1949). Furthermore, those existential philosophers who do tend to place greater emphasis on the more 'negative' experiences do not see these as ends in themselves, but as aspects of a more fulfilling, intense and alive way of being. Indeed, the emphasis on 'negative' experiences is often an attempt to counterbalance the tendency within modern culture to deny the more painful and discomfiting sides of our lives. Existential philosophy, then, is less a philosophy of doom and despair, and more a philosophy of balance (Kohn, 1984: 385).

This issue of balance is also a response to a fifth criticism of existential philosophy: that in prizing passionate inquiry over objectivity and systematic thinking, it is essentially irrationalist (Macquarrie, 1972).

Again, there is some truth in this: existential philosophers have emphasised the importance of being open to the non-rational and mysterious (for instance, Marcel, 1949). This is not, however, a rejection of the rational, but an attempt to see the other side of it. As Macquarrie writes: 'Existentialism at its best is neither irrational nor anti-rational but is concerned rather with affirming that the fullness of human experience breaks out of the confines of conceptual thought and that our lives can be diminished by too narrow a rationalism' (Macquarrie, 1972: 221).

At the other end of the scale, however, is an equally serious criticism, and one that has, perhaps, been the most significant factor in the recent decline of existential philosophising. Existential philosophy is fundamentally grounded in the assumption that existence is real, that it is a phenomenon that is there, and which transcends the particular words or discourse we use to describe it. In recent years, however, postmodern philosophers such as Derrida (1974) and Lyotard (1984) have argued that any knowledge is always contained within a particular language system or 'discourse', and that it is not possible to stand outside of this system and prove the reality of a phenomenon. In other words, we cannot go beyond the bounds of our language to show that existence *really* exists – it is, ultimately, only a particular narrative that we adopt. This criticism has serious repercussions for a philosophy that invites people to authentically acknowledge their true existence, and is by no means easy to respond to. Indeed, to answer in words the postmodern critique would be to prove the very postmodern point: that our arguments are always constrained within the boundaries of language. Nevertheless, what is important to note is that, whether it is real or not, human beings' existences are of great significance to themselves. Hence, even if we cannot prove that existence exists, we can certainly show that it is of great relevance to human beings – and thus to the process of therapy (M. Cooper, 1999). It is perhaps no surprise, then, that whilst little new existential philosophy has been developed over the past half-century, existential ideas have increasingly spread into the therapeutic arena.

## Conclusion

Existential philosophy, by its very nature, is a vast and sprawling edifice, replete with debates, contradictions and half-completed arguments. As we have seen, however, what each philosopher of existence shares is a concern with the nature of human existence: that unique, concrete, indefinable totality. Existential philosophers have depicted this existence in many different ways, but what is common to each of their descriptions is a radical challenge to many of our contemporary assumptions about what it means to be human. At times, these challenges can be more destructive than constructive, but together they create a radically new, and radically humanising, image of what it means to exist. What better foundations,

then, on which to construct the most human of professional practices: counselling and psychotherapy.

## Notes

1. In this book, I have used the term 'existential philosophy' to refer to a particular philosophical stance or style of philosophising, also referred to as 'existentialism' (Macquarrie, 1972) or 'existentialist philosophy' (D. E. Cooper, 1999). It should be noted however, that the term can also be used in a broader sense. For instance, van Deurzen (2002c) uses the term 'existential philosophy' to refer to all enquiries into the question of how to live a better life, of which the existential philosophy discussed in this chapter is just one part.

2. As Dreyfus (1997) suggests, I have used 'the One' – as is 'one does ...' – rather than 'the they' throughout this book, as the latter term can imply that the self is not part of this social order.

## Further reading

### Introductions and overviews

- Guignon, C. B. (1988) 'Existentialism', in E. Craig (ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (vol. 3). London: Routledge. Very brief, but enormously lucid, accessible and incisive summary of existential thought.
- Macquarrie, J. (1972) *Existentialism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. Uniquely accessible, comprehensive and coherent account of key themes and debates within existentialism. If you only ever read one book on existential philosophy, make it this one.
- Warnock, M. (1970) *Existentialism* (rev. edn). Oxford: Oxford University Press. Classic introduction to the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre.
- Cooper, D. E. (1999) *Existentialism* (2nd edn). London: Routledge. Contemporary overview of existential thought.
- Van Deurzen-Smith, E. (1997) *Everyday Mysteries: Existential Dimensions of Psychotherapy*. London: Routledge (Chs. 1–6). Useful summary of the ideas of key existential philosophers and their relevance to therapeutic practice.
- Spinelli, E. (1989) *The Interpreted World: An Introduction to Phenomenological Psychology*. London: Sage. Very clear introduction to phenomenology, specifically orientated towards therapists and psychologists.
- Moran, D. (2000) *Introduction to Phenomenology*. London: Routledge. Comprehensive, accessible and in-depth introduction to the writings of Husserl and the key phenomenologists, including such existential-phenomenologists as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.
- Cohn, H. W. (2002) *Heidegger and the Roots of Existential Therapy*. London: Continuum. Clearly and simply outlines some of Heidegger's key concepts and their implications for therapeutic practice. Polt's (1999) introduction to Heidegger is a more in-depth, and brilliantly lucid, introduction to his works, as is Dreyfus's *Being-in-the-World*, which systematically outlines key aspects of Heidegger's thinking.

## Original texts

None of the books below are easy, and some can seem impenetrable at times, but there is nothing like reading a philosopher's original works to give you a sense of his or her outlook and style of philosophising. Don't worry too much if you can't understand all of what you read – or even most of it – some of the greatest minds of our century have struggled with these texts.

- Friedman, M. (ed.) (1964) *The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Anthology of existential writings, with a whole section on existentialism and psychotherapy. Kaufman's (1975) anthology has fewer readings, but they are more in depth.
- Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time*. (Trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson.) Oxford: Blackwell. (Original work published 1926.) Probably the single most important and influential existential text. Brings to the fore the question of existence, highlights its 'in-the-world'-ly nature, and outlines its authentic possibilities. Tough-going, but enormously stimulating and thought-provoking. Stambaugh's (1996) more recent translation has been very well received.
- Sartre, J. P. (1958) *Being and Nothingness*. (Trans. H. Barnes.) London: Routledge. (Original work published 1943.) Turgid, dense and highly inaccessible, but Sartre's *magnum opus* provides a brilliant analysis of the human condition – in all its freedom, absurdity and nothingness – and is one of the most significant existential texts.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*. (Trans. C. Smith.) London: Routledge. (Original work published 1945.) Merleau-Ponty's most important work, emphasising the fundamentally embodied nature of human existence. A brilliant and original analysis, but extremely tough-going.
- Camus, A. (1955) *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. (Original work published 1942.) Camus's key philosophical work. Succinct and relatively accessible, asks whether life is worth living, and concludes that human beings can still create meaning and an intensity of living in a meaningless universe.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1992) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. (Trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong.) Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1846.) Generally recognised as Kierkegaard's *magnum opus*, emphasising the subjective, individual nature of truth and the path towards God. Turgid and tough-going, but surprisingly humorous at times, and with remarkably vivid insights into the human condition.
- Nietzsche, F. (1967) *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. (Trans. T. Common.) London: Allen and Unwin. (Original work published 1883.) Nietzsche's classic work, filled with aphorisms on the body, courage and the will to power.
- Buber, M. (1958) *I and Thou* (2nd edn). (Trans. R. G. Smith.) Edinburgh: T & T Clark. (Original work published 1923.) Poetic, passionate and relatively accessible – Buber's essential work contrasting the I-Thou and I-It ways of being.
- Tillich, P. (2000) *The Courage to Be*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (Original work published 1952.) Popular and relatively accessible work that advocates a stance of courageousness and faith in the face of moral, spiritual and ontological non-being.
- Heidegger, M. (1966) *Discourse on Thinking*. (Trans. J. M. Anderson and E. H. Freund.) London: Harper Colophon Books. (Original work published 1959.) Relatively accessible introduction to, and presentation of, Heidegger's later thought: contrasting 'meditative' and 'calculative' thinking.