Existential Psychoanalysis

Chapter 14
Rollo May

- 1909-1994
- Born Ada, OH
- Raise in anti-intellectual Midwest
  - Too much education → psychotic behavior
- Undergrad at Oberlin College
- Began as seminary student before pursuing psychology
  - Explore the meaning of despair, suicide, anxiety
- Contracted TB in his 30s
The Existential Movement

- Movement in Philosophy
- Latin: *existere* (to stand out, to emerge)
- Famous Existentialists
  - Kierkegaard
  - Heidegger
  - Nietzsche
  - Sartre (“No Exit” & “Being and Nothingness”)
- Origins in resistance movement in Europe during WW II
Western philosophy and science seeks to understand the *essence* of being
- Fundamental laws and principles—mathematics
- Psychology—forces, drives, conditioned behavior

Existentialism: laws can be *true* but not *real*
- “Existence precedes essence”
- “Two unicorns plus two unicorns equals four unicorns”
- Seeks to unite the abstractly true with the existentially real
  - Theories and abstractions are not substitutes for the real thing
The Existential Movement

- Focus on understanding one’s striving to become human
  - Or to “know” our humanity
  - Being and becoming
  - Or to construct our humanity

- We are **players** in the **game** of life
  - Our *experience* as players differs from that of the spectator
  - We can’t be detached or uninvolved...
  - No one set of rules, or truths, for this game
Lawfulness is Over-rated

- Not anti-scientific
- Rather, scientific understanding is limited in its ability to understand the human condition
- Reductionism is misleading
  - “Simpler can be explained only in terms of the more complex”
  - What makes a horse is not its evolutionary lineage, but its intrinsic “horseness”
  - Phenomenology/experience of depression
- “Knowing” arrives from doing and immersing one’s self in the experience
Powerlessness

- Pervasive sense that one can do nothing in the face of society, the establishment, and the loss of traditional values
  - Horney (basic anxiety) & Adler (inferiority)
  - Vietnam, persistent middle east violence
  - Fear of nuclear war/world annihilation
- Feelings of **emptiness** (*ennui*)
  - Lack of purpose, lack of efficacy in the face of societal accomplishments → adrift
- Powerlessness manifested in anxiety, dread, apathy, violence, & hostility
Cycle of Powerlessness

Feelings of Powerlessness

Sense of alienation ➔ Anxiety/repression

Violence/hostility ← Apathy (protective)
Anxiety

- Death is the fundamental anxiety
- The ‘Age of Anxiety’
- Western civilization has become inattentive to our needs as humans in our striving for meaning and understanding
  - 40 hour work week, 2 weeks vacation
- The price we pay for “progress?”
- Stress = anxiety
  - BUT, stress happens “to” us, not our experience
More Anxiety

- **Anxiety** is the *inevitable* apprehension cued off by a threat to a value associated with our existence
  - An innate potential
  - Associated breakdown of distinction between the self and objects → strikes at this basic distinction between self and other
  - Fear is anxiety expressed in objectified form

Awareness of ultimate concern → anxiety → defense
Coping with Anxiety

- Efforts to dispel anxiety only serve to perpetuate it
  - We fill our emptiness with drugs, alcohol, or inappropriate authority
  - We have yet to cope with modernity
- Recognition is the key
  - If we come to an understanding of our condition, embrace our condition, we can cope with it
Losing our Values...

- Renaissance was a turning point (Western values)
  - Redefined ourselves by emphasizing work and financial accomplishments
- This competitiveness no longer effective in the modern day world
  - We have lost the ability to relate to other people and estranged from nature
    - IM, ICQ, e-Mail vs. Face-to-Face conversation
  - We have given up the distinctiveness of being humans to serve competitive goals
..and Finding Them Again

- One answer to this dilemma is that we can return to our traditional, possibly “fundamentalist,” values

- BUT, we have no essence, no “true” values to which we can return
  - Re-affirmation of traditional values is impossible
  - Since we are always being and becoming, we must therefore choose our values in the process of living
    - Withdraw into anxiety vs. Work to form a new society
    - Particularly in times of crisis → 9/11
The Boundary Situation

- An urgent, crisis, situation that forces an individual to confront the existential situation
  - Often, learn the importance of the present, living in the present
  - Take stock, appreciate, the world as it is
- Massive “paradigmatic” shift
- Death is THE boundary situation
  - Personal growth in the terminally ill cancer patient
  - “What a tragedy I had to wait until now to learn what I’ve learned…”
- Death therapy ➔ structured exercises confronting death and dying
Self-Consciousness

- Often seen as a pejorative term
- What May thought set us apart from other animals
- What allows us to distinguish ourselves from the world, have empathy, learn from the past, look to the future, have empathy
  - The cost to us is anxiety and inner crisis
  - Why? We must develop an identity independent from those around us
Rediscovering Feelings

- We have only a vague notion of what we are feeling at any given time
  - Experience separation of mind and body (denial)
- When we are unaware of our feelings, we are not in touch with our needs
  - We experience forbidden feelings/needs and, in the service of societal demands, deny them or only experience them in private
  - Fragmented, disorganized, self
- Becoming a person requires not just being in touch with one’s feelings but also fighting impediments to experiencing our feelings
  - Fight outside world → internalized values
  - We become our own jailors
Four States of Consciousness

- **Stage of Innocence** characterizes infants and precedes consciousness of self.
- **Stage of rebellion** characterizes toddlers and adolescents who seek inner strength through defiance and hostility.
- **Ordinary consciousness of self** refers to learning from our mistakes and living responsibly.
- **Creative consciousness of self** represents emergence of some perspective taking—rarely achieved—similar to peak experiences.
Goals of Integration

- Humans are conscious of self, capable of intentionality, and needing to make choices
- Attempted to counter prevailing notion of Cartesian mind-body duality
  - Society teaches dualisms that distance ourselves from our needs and feelings
  - Integration involves finding balance
The Paradox

- Abstract realizations fail to capture the human experience
- Instead, focus on paradox
- Defined as any two objects/concepts paired against each other, seeming to negate each other, but that can’t exist alone
  - Good & evil, happy & sad, success & failure
  - The confrontation of one defines, brings life, into the other
- The goal of integration, then, is to confronting the inherent paradoxes in life
The Daimonic

- Any natural function that has the power to take over one’s life or existence
  - Sex, anger, power
  - *Become* evil when they take over without regard for self-integration
  - Repression fails, it will control us
  - Become aware, integrate it into ourselves
    - Cherish our demons, enjoy the “spice”
Power

- Powerlessness is the fundamental crisis facing humans
- The challenge we face is finding a balance between being “powerful” and enduring the discomfort of “powerlessness”
- Violence has its roots in “powerlessness”
  - Individuals engage in violent acts to enhance self-worth and self-esteem
- TV cultivates powerlessness by teaching the spectator role
- Use power appropriate to the situation
  - Assert ourselves, avoid aggression
Love and Sex

- Love once viewed as the answer our problems
  - “All you need is love,” right?
- Society has led us to be unable to love
- We live an a world devoid of affect and fraught with apathy
  - An effort to protect ourselves from the overstimulation of the modern world
- Sexual revolution another form of Puritanism?
  - Sexuality without emotion, relation to others
  - Pornography, commercialization, as power
- We need to rediscover care to get back in balance
Intentionality

- The structure that gives meaning to an experience
  - Imaginative activity that informs our actions
- A piece of paper
  - For a paper airplane, a love letter, to start a fire
- A piece of wood
  - To build a house, carve a statue, fashion a club
- Bridges the gap between subject and object \( \rightarrow \) structures our perceptions and understandings of the world
Freedom and Destiny

- Existentialism criticized for being “too free”
- Freedom means “openness, readiness to grow, flexibility, and changing in pursuit of human values”
  - To choose, to value, to guide our life course
- Destiny is the “vital design of the universe expressed within each one of us”
  - Sets limits on us
  - Equips us to perform certain tasks
  - Our present society reflects freedom without destiny
More on Freedom and Destiny

- **Determinism** is one aspect of destiny
  - Mechanistic, scientific
  - Inanimate objects, unaware of our own responses
  - Shift to destiny occurs when one is self conscious of what is happening

- **Responsibility** is inseparable from freedom
  - Accepting personal responsibility pivotal to finding freedom
  - **Pause** is the ability to break up the rigid chain of cause and effect → freedom springs from pause
Courage and Creativity

- Courage refers to the capacity to move ahead despite feeling despair
  - Facilitates the being and becoming
- Courage involves being fully committed even though we may be wrong
- Creative courage involves finding novel patterns, symbols, forms
  - Particularly, those symbols from which a new society can be constructed
  - Creative courage means confronting the established order such that a new world might be created
A Cry for Myth

- May posited that problems facing society arose from lack of myths.
- May defined *myths* as “narrative patterns that give significance to our existence.”
- Western society cast aside myths in favor of left-brain thinking.
- May’s myths similar to Jung’s archetypes:
  - Be part of a human collective
  - The Birth Myth (stories taking on mythic meanings)
Existential Psychotherapy

1. Patients learn how behavior is viewed by others (therapist, group therapy)
2. Patients learn how behavior makes others feel (experienced affect)
3. Patients learn how behavior creates the opinions others have of them
4. Patients learn how their behaviors influence their opinions of themselves
Existentialism in the Mainstream

It’s a Wonderful Life
Paris, Texas
Brazil