

The Search for Meaning and the Spiritual Side of Psychological Health



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The Search for Meaning and the Spiritual Side of Psychological Health: Alfried Längle's Theory of Existential Analysis¹

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What constitutes psychological health and well-being? What does it mean to live a fulfilling existence? How do we address questions about our capabilities and responsibilities as human beings within the discipline of psychology and within the therapeutic setting itself? How do we explore our individual and collective beliefs within the arena of mental health?

Questions such as these transcend the traditional boundaries of psychology, yet these same questions expose fundamentally personal and spiritual expressions about our human quest for meaning and the importance that meaning, values and beliefs play in how we define ourselves as human beings and the extent to which we define ourselves as psychologically healthy and productive. With these large questions in mind, I would like to

¹ This paper is based on my research and work with Dr. Längle's theory of Existential Analysis.

offer an illustration, albeit brief, of how Alfried Längle's theory of existential analysis provides an avenue for analyzing the overlap between psychological and spiritual well-being. Existential analysis is, I feel, a positive psychotherapeutic approach that first, focuses on the fact that we are spiritual beings, oriented towards the quest and search for meaning and second, situates its therapeutic emphasis on the infinite potential and possibility within each of us to transcend and transform our suffering into healing, strength and enduring health.

In the late 1950's Erich Fromm wrote,

“psychology can show us what [human beings are] not. It cannot tell us what each one of us, is. The soul of [human beings], the unique core of each individual, can never be grasped and described adequately...the legitimate aim of psychology thus is the negative, the removal of distortions and illusions, not the positive, the full and complete knowledge of a human being”.²

Fromm's comment cautioned against psychology's growing influence on how we see ourselves. His comment resonates today and existential analysis is one contemporary therapeutic approach I believe capable of contributing to the expansion of our knowledge of what it is to be human. Existential analysis does so by addressing the spiritual and profoundly human questions we are capable of asking: “who am I?”, “what is the purpose of my life?”,

² Erich Fromm, “The Limitations and Dangers of Psychology” in Walter Leibrecht ed. *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1959), 33.

“who should I be?” and “what is the meaning of my life?” Confronting these questions openly re-orient therapeutic intervention towards a positive and expansive vision of psychological growth and development by drawing our attention to the infinite potential and possibility that lie within the ambiguity, indeed the enduring mystery, of human existence.

Viktor Frankl, whose theory of Logotherapy provides the historical foundations of existential analysis, often stated that every psychological theory has a philosophy of human kind at its core. Whether stated implicitly or explicitly, every psychological theory has something to say about what constitutes health, well-being and what it means to live a fulfilling and productive existence. Längle’s theory is no exception. It outlines the basic structure of a fulfilling existence, the criterion for and outcome of mental health. Let me highlight five (5) ways human existence is viewed from an existential analytic perspective:

(1) **Human existence is fundamentally dialogical.** Human beings need and actively seek out dialogue and encounter with the world, with others and with themselves. To this end, the individual and the world are inextricably linked;

(2) **Human existence is meaningful.** The value, dignity and uniqueness of each individual is upheld in existential analysis. Moreover, a meaningful

existence is shaped by freedom and responsibility (these are considered inherent human qualities in existential psychotherapies) and yet individual freedom and responsibility are concurrently shaped by ongoing dialogues between self and other, self and world. The existential meaning of existence, therefore, rests in our own hands. The meaningfulness of our lives depends on our capacity to integrate both inner and outer dialogical openness.

(3) Human beings have drives, aims, goals, tasks, values and purpose that they want to live out authentically. The aim of therapy is to help free an individual from fixations, distortions or trauma that influence their experiences or behavior and hinder their ability to engage fully in these purposeful tasks and goals. The aim is not to eliminate these tendencies but to discover inner resources that allow an individual to live in concordance with them.

(4) Human existence is not static, it has movement and purpose.

Existence is a constant process of becoming and as such we have the ability to change things, change ourselves. We have the ability to experience what is of value and eliminate what is harmful. We therefore have the ability to create our world and “form” ourselves.

(5) Existential analysis is not idealistic. It takes into account certain existential realities of human existence. For example, human beings suffer psychologically, physically and spiritually. Human life has both tragic and infinitely fulfilling elements. Human beings are capable of both creative and destructive ventures. Human beings are capable of self-reflective thought and this gives them the capacity to analyze their existence, place their actions, thoughts and feelings in context. Further, our capacity for self-reflection strengthens our capacity to make decisions and to choose a course of action within these realities. Decisions, choice and responsibility are all fundamental aspects of psychological growth and development. There is a commitment within existential analysis to encourage a client to take the individual “leap” towards decision and action.

Existential Analysis – A Phenomenological Approach

Let us look at several of these points in greater detail. As mentioned, the historical roots of existential analysis lie within Viktor Frankl’s theory of Logotherapy. The foundational philosophy of existential analysis and its therapeutic emphasis on meaning and value owe much to Frankl’s work. Längle has, however, taken this foundation and expanded on it greatly, thereby creating a far more extensive therapeutic approach.

Existential analysis is a phenomenological approach and method of psychotherapy. Phenomenological, in this particular theoretical context, means that both therapist and client come together with an attitude of openness, an attempt not to impose, manipulate or control. A concerted effort is made to suspend judgment, interpretation or theoretical bias in order to rely on what Längle describes as “subjective intelligence, feeling and sensing”.³ This allows the experiences the individual has, to “speak”. Put another way, this approach allows our experiences to “speak for themselves”.⁴ Allowing our feelings, senses and perceptions to speak in the moment without the imposition of interpretation offers a chance to glimpse and possibly understand what Längle also describes as “the unique essence of an individual”.⁵ After many years of clinical and private practice, Längle has stated that clients want to be **understood** and not interpreted.⁶ Clients want their stories and experiences to be heard and empathetically received.

Personal Existential Analysis – A Dialogical Method

Acknowledging a relational dialogue, as opposed to clinical interpretation, and the engagement between therapist and client as open-

³ Alfried Längle, “Existential Fundamental Motivation”, Paper read at the 18th World Congress of Psychotherapy in Trondheim, Norway, August 16, 2002. Can be found at http://www.laengle.info/al/al_pu_li.php?sprache=en.

⁴ Längle, “Existential Fundamental Motivation”, 1.

⁵ Längle, “Existential Fundamental Motivation”, 1.

⁶ Personal notes taken during Längle’s comments on an existential analytic approach to therapy. Weekend seminar on Existential Analysis held at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia November 19 - 20, 2004.

ended and mutually transforming presumes “on both sides” mutual encounter, responsibility, reliance, faith, trust and respect. The therapeutic encounter thus becomes a reflection or mirror of human expression: a combination of fact and possibility. The therapeutic encounter involves the client’s story of factual situations and realities, then moves to a re-assessment, or an emotional re-experiencing, of the client’s encounter with these same realities. This is followed by a re-evaluation of those feelings and experiences in light of the present dialogue within therapy, the client’s experience in the present moment and the possibilities that emerge within this encounter. Therapy therefore, from an existential psychotherapeutic perspective, is a spontaneous dialogue reflecting the experience of encounter between the client and therapist and the creative possibilities that emerge within this dialogue. As a result of this dialogical exchange, the client is able to sharpen their capacity for decision thereby enabling them to take concrete action.

The subjective experiences of the client are shaped further by cultural and social contexts, beliefs, meanings and values. Because existential analysis focuses on an open dialogue, the client’s own language is exposed and social, cultural, familial and religious contexts become transparent. Further, because a therapist within an existential framework approaches the

client with an attitude of dialogue and openness, these contexts are respected and validated. The client has the ability to engage, using their own language and this, it is hoped, will facilitate the client's ability to take that responsible "leap" towards change within and from his or her own reference points.

Focusing on what is possible, the therapeutic encounter enables the client to grasp what is potentially creative and positive. Indeed, the aim of existential analysis is to assist a person towards authentic and responsible decisions. A fulfilling existence is defined as a fully lived "whole" life possible only in relationship, possible only by taking that individual "leap" and being engaged with the world.

Being Oneself in Relationship

This kind of therapeutic approach, as we can see, centers on a specific attitude and stance towards human existence. Existential analysis, as stated, is based on the interdependent or relational reality of human life. This does not, however, negate individuality. On the contrary, individuality is real within relationship. Our individual responses, actions and decisions are seen within the multiple contexts in which we exist. Therapy focuses on how we encounter the world, how we integrate the world around us, how we contribute to the world, how we respond to, accept or challenge the facts of our existence, on how we construct meaning and finally, how we live

creatively. All of these are seen within the contexts of both the subjective experience of the client and the world in which they live. Psychological growth, health and development are contingent upon a client's participation in, dialogue and engagement with, and response to the world. It requires the individual to think, feel, react and participate both subjectively and beyond their subjectivity by transcending, reaching beyond creatively through faith, hope, possibility, decision and action. Once again, it is the responsive "leap" towards the world based on faith and trust that is precipitated by the client's acceptance and affirmation of who he or she is.

This fundamental characteristic of being human, namely, the active search and striving for dialogue, connection and relation with others implies our constant engagement with the world, even with our selves. This continuous engagement and encounter also demands something of us. As human beings, we have the ability to access our unique freedom and to evaluate situations as we encounter them. We assess the reality of a situation before us. We have the capacity to contemplate the potentials that lie within a moment or encounter we face. We have the freedom to decide in this moment: what choice we will make, what stand we might take, or what kind of attitude we might adopt as we engage in the situation. This is,

from an existential perspective, the continual challenge that confronts and distinguishes us as human beings. Längle states,

The possibilities within this world point to our human potential: we shape our existence through these possibilities. “Existence” means having a chance to change things for the better, to experience what is of value and to avoid or eliminate what could be damaging or harmful. Possibilities provide us with directions to which we can orient ourselves. This is an essential orientation of human beings, not a superficial one. Being directed towards what is possible, what is yet to be fulfilled, what is waiting for us each in each and every situation corresponds perfectly to the essence of our spirit – a spirit that is looking out for participation, dialogue, creativity and possibility. We see the essential task of existence to be one of finding this correspondence between our potential for participation (for creativity, action and encounter) and what is possible, what is needed, what is undone, what we see and feel and understand to be waiting for us, despite the possibility of risk and error.⁷

Psychological, indeed spiritual health follows from such an approach.

Existence Needs Acceptance

If our response to these encounters and engagements is to be considered authentic, in other words, if it reaches toward our human potential, there must be a coordination of both inner and outer reality. Our response must have our inner consent, a subjective affirmation at the experiential level that this is the right response. In addition, our response must also include a realistic assessment of the external world or outer reality.

⁷ Längle, “The Search for Meaning in Life and the Existential Fundamental Motivations”, *The International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy* 1, Issue 1 (July 2004): 29.

It requires us to acknowledge and accept the realities and facts in which we are embedded. Längle states,

To accept means to be ready to occupy the space that I am in, to rely on the support given and to trust the protection bestowed on me; in short “to be here” and not to flee. To endure requires the fortitude to accept whatever may be difficult, menacing or unalterable and to tolerate what cannot be changed. Life imposes certain conditions on me; the world has its laws to which I must adapt. This idea is expressed in the word “subject” in the sense of “not independent”, of being subject to. On the other hand these same conditions of the world are reliable, solid and steady despite the boundaries they impose. I can allow them to be and accept them if I can be at the same time. To accept means letting the other be, whether a person, a thing or a situation. It means that I can be and the other can be equally because there is still enough space for me and the circumstances do not threaten my being here.⁸

This is a key element towards health and well-being. Every encounter we have challenges us in terms of our response. We may weigh what our response will be, evaluate our response and actions in terms of a personal moral stand or culturally shared ethic. We weigh what is possible with what might be needed, demanded or appropriate in a particular moment or situation. We weigh this against a backdrop of shifting realities and we do this despite the fact that every decision we make is simultaneously cast in possible risk, doubt or error. This realistic “weighing” exposes once again the ambiguity of human life yet it is precisely the acceptance of and living

⁸ Längle, “The Search for Meaning in Life and the Existential Fundamental Motivations”, 32.

within this ambiguity that allows psychological and spiritual growth to occur.

Working With Clients Needs Participating Presence

This particular approach to psychotherapy is a decidedly optimistic one of possibility in the face of reality. Existential analysis meets clients at the profoundly human level. Therapy necessarily places its initial focus on the individual as he or she present themselves sitting with the therapist but this therapeutic approach, based on dialogue between client and therapist, presumes encounter and requires the therapist to be engaged and involved; he or she is far from being a neutral or objective by-stander. On the contrary, the therapist encounters another human being within this dialogue and this opens the door to analyzing the ethical and spiritual connection occurring between therapist and client, a connection that reflects the ethical and spiritual embedded in all of human encounter. Each of the client's highly individualized statements is a simultaneous expression of familial, social, ethical and religious meanings, values and aspirations. Dialogue within therapy reveals the complex relationship between inner and outer reality and does so not just for the client but for the therapist too. Both are thus challenged, moved and changed by their encounter.

Existential analysis integrates and attempts to mobilize an individual's subjective experience, freedom for decision, creativity, and action within his or her concurrent social contexts. Understanding an individual's essential core is only possible through relationship and the dialogical act: the coordination, in other words, of both inner and outer reality. Greater psychological understanding and growth on our part requires both our awareness of the dialogue we are engaged in and our unique responsibility. As individuals we are never free from the responsibility we have for decision or the attitudes we may or may not choose to adopt. Our part in psychological and spiritual growth is activating our human ability to decide, choose and act.

Conclusion

Längle's theory of existential analysis explores fundamental questions of existence. Further, these questions are not singularly psychological. They are open-ended, they resound with multiple meanings and ethical interpretations of what human existence is and what we wish to strive for and accomplish as human beings. Such questions, reflected in therapy by clients who are attempting to understand and fully grasp the meaning and value of their existence, point to how open psychological health and well-being are to interpretation. Längle has stated, "in the midst of this world I

discover myself unmistakably”, this assumes the fluidity of concepts such as “world” and “I”. From an existential perspective, the discovery of who I am is an ongoing process open to change. A concept of self, from this perspective, does not assume that the self is either fixed or stable. What constitutes self is sometimes identifiable, sometimes elusive. A unique and distinguishable “I” is simultaneously dependent on and draws meaning from the world.

Fundamental existential questions such as “who am I?” engage psychotherapy in a deeper dialogue of personal and collective values, beliefs and ethics. The meaning of our unique existence rests within the dialogues we have with the wider culture of which we are part and this, existential analysis suggests, raises the possibility of analyzing and contributing to the connections between individual and cultural development. Valuing the individual and community as interrelated places more trust and faith in individuals and the creative power they may exercise in the world.

Existential analysis, like any psychological theory, has, as Frankl pointed out but as few theories actually acknowledge, a philosophy of human nature at its core. Existential analysis assumes human nature is a “multidimensional unity”, to borrow a phrase from theologian Paul Tillich. Therapy must reflect this multidimensionality as the dialogues that take

place within therapy, as I have suggested, are both personal and collective expressions of possibility against shifting backdrops of reality. These dialogues expose what it is to be human, what it is to experience and express faith, what is both constructed and experienced as meaningful. These dialogues express ethical statements, cultural norms and expectations. Therapeutic dialogues within existential analysis expose a client's experiences of hope, resiliency, relationship, support, community, fear, isolation and despair. The experiences a client has and the relationship they have to and with the outside world extend equally to highly personal experiences they have of themselves. Existential analysis encourages the expression of these experiences through dialogue in therapy and by doing so, keeps our individual inquiries about our existence alive as a positive avenue towards enduring health and development. In conclusion, I quote Dr. Längle once again who states,

I must seize life by engaging with life. When I turn to other people...I turn towards life. When I move towards something or someone, allow myself to get close, allow myself to be touched, I experience life as vibrant.⁹

⁹ "The Search for Meaning in Life and the Fundamental Existential Motivation", 33.