

Responsibility, Compassion and Care

Linking Psychological Health and Ethics in everyday live



Responsibility, Compassion and Care: Linking Psychological Health and Ethics in Everyday Life

Britt-Mari Sykes PhD

Abstract

The paper explores the psychotherapeutic approach of Existential Analysis, a theory that situates psychological health amidst the development of selfhood, community and the ethics in every day life. Existential analysis offers a theoretical framework to examine the meaning of psychological health and development from a broad, positive and interdisciplinary perspective. Existential analysis distinguishes itself from other psychotherapies through its emphasis on the meaning of our existence and the dialogical and interdependent nature of our being. The vision of humankind at the foundation of existential analysis is one of interrelation: we actively seek out dialogue, connection, and meaning with other individuals and with the wider world. This continuous dialogue exposes the ethical balance and weighing we engage in, both consciously and unconsciously. A psychotherapy that delves into the meaning of our individual decisions, attitudes and responses opens our psychological development to include the broader implications of our individual freedom, the scope of our responsibility and our capacity for compassion and care. The paper will examine the following: the philosophical foundations of existential analysis, the theory's *four fundamental existential motivations* and finally, offer an illustration of the dialogical encounter between therapist and patient.

Keywords: Responsibility, Dialogue, Relational, Psychotherapy, Health, Well-being, Existential Analysis, Fundamental Motivations, Ethical Being

“...one of the most difficult ethical problems [is] the relation of self-affirmation and love towards others”ⁱ. Paul Tillich

Theologian Paul Tillich's statement of the relational and ethical reality of human life parallels the *existential duty*, outlined in Alfried Längle's psychoanalytic theory of Existential Analysis.ⁱⁱ Each of us has a duty to do something with the fact that we exist and this includes navigating both the continuous development of our own individuality and also how our individuality is shaped through a strong connection with community. The meeting point between individuality and community is where my interests in psychological health, ethics and the psychoanalytic theory of existential analysis merge. I am interested in the link between our attitudes and behavioral expressions of compassion, care and responsibility and our psychological health. For the purpose of this

brief paper I would like to suggest that existential analysis offers a theoretical model that situates psychological health and well-being amidst the development of selfhood, community and the ethics in every day life. Psychological health from this perspective is, to elaborate on Tillich's words, the interconnection of turning towards our selves in self-affirmation and self-acceptance and turning towards others with openness, love and respect.

Engaging psychology in a dialogue with the ethics in every day life enriches the scope of theory and therapy by placing our individual psychological health and development within a much broader and more positive framework of human potential. Definitions of psychological health and well-being have tended to be fixed and restrictive, focusing on defined levels of pathology and its removal, or on intra-psychic processes. In either case, the narrow focus on the individual psyche often ignores the multiple contexts in which human life expresses itself. If, instead, we situate definitions of psychological health at the nexus point of individuality and community, health becomes a far more fluid term. We could then expand what psychology might also address: the ethical, social, familial, cultural, political and spiritual contexts of human expression. This broadened approach would include how these contexts interact with our subjective and interpersonal experiences, on what we deem meaningful, fulfilling and of value. Such an approach would also address the psychological implications at the interface of *self and other* by examining our choices, decisions and the attitudes we adopt. Existential analysis provides an interpersonal paradigm to examine the ethical implications that exist at the meeting point between self and other and therefore offers a real dialogue on what constitutes health and well-being.

Psychological health, from an existential analytic perspective, is defined as the outcome of positive or purposeful development, development that activates our potentialities, makes us increasingly aware of our decisions, choices, responsibilities and relationships and thereby enables us to live more meaningfully and authentically. Existential analysis is one therapeutic approach that links the experiential value and meaning of engagement and connection with the wider world to positive and sustained psychological health and development at the individual level. Once again, it is this meeting point, centered on our engagement, decision and action that bridges individual

health with the ethical issues continuously present in everyday life; the ethical issues that emerge from our continuous confrontation with, and response to, *otherness*.

Let me highlight three key elements of existential analysis to illustrate my point. These are our dialogical nature, freedom and responsibility and the search for meaning and authenticity. Human existence, from an existential analytic perspective, is viewed as fundamentally *dialogical*. We actively seek out dialogue and connection with others. Our lives are a continuous encounter between our individual subjective experiences and perceptions and the external world. We are, as Längle states, “always waiting for the completion by a partner in the broadest sense”.ⁱⁱⁱ This continuous confrontation or encounter with *otherness* demands something of us individually. We are questioned by life, questioned by what confronts us, and in order to live fully and authentically we are required to respond.

This continuous dialogue, a continuous meeting or encounter between self and other so necessary for human life to flourish also exposes the ethical balance and weighing we continuously engage in, both consciously and unconsciously. Intrapersonal dialogue offers the possibility to know ourselves with greater depth and to grow in awareness by assessing our capabilities and our failings realistically. Interpersonal dialogue requires us to be receptive to others, challenges us to be open experientially in order to be touched, moved and cared for by others. Dialogue may open the door to our deeper potentials, it may reveal our capacity, and may guide our choices, to act responsibly, to respect others and show compassion towards them. Dialogue means being engaged with life at a moral and ethical level. A “lack of profound dialogue, and consequently of mutual understanding”, by contrast, “provokes an anxiety of alienation and of loss of identity”.^{iv}

A second key element of existential analysis is that human beings are both *free and responsible*. Each of us is free to make a decision, adopt a particular attitude, weigh the possibilities of a given situation, and choose the degree to which we engage or participate in the world through purposeful action. From an existential perspective, each of these freedoms is simultaneously framed by responsibility. Since existence is dialogical, our freedom also comes with the responsibility of contemplating, analyzing and weighing the outcomes of our decisions, the implications of our attitudes, the depth

of our engagement and the consequences of our actions. Navigating this paradox of freedom and responsibility exercises the range of our individual potential. We have the capacity to reach out and respond to others compassionately and with care but we are equally capable of turning away from our fellow human beings through destructive and neglectful acts. We are free to turn away psychologically, experientially and spiritually from our own potential; free to turn away from the depth and meaning of our lives; free to turn away from our very humanity. We may do this through decisive acts of psychological and physical isolation and separation: hatred, anger, cynicism, prejudice, destructive and violent acts towards ourselves and others, rigid attitudes we covet that break the possibility of dialogue and communion. And yet we are equally capable of choosing the opposite.

A third element of existential analysis is our *search for meaningful and authentic expressions of human existence*. Not only do we seek out dialogue and engagement, we also seek meaning and value to our experiences and to our life generally. A meaningful life is a fully lived life shaped by dialogue, freedom and responsibility. A meaningful existence is an engaged existence: a life of participation with those around us and with the greater world. Meaning is discovered through our participation in life, answering the demands that life places before us and responding with our own authentic voice and action. The discovery of meaning lies in what is possible. “The possibilities within this world”, Längle states, “point to our human potential: we shape our existence [and the meaning of that existence] through these possibilities”.^v These possibilities require ethical contemplation and decision. Once again, we have the awareness to weigh what our responses will be, evaluate our responses and actions in terms of a personal moral stand or culturally shared ethics. We weigh what is possible with what might be needed, demanded or appropriate in a particular moment or situation. The “task of existence” as Längle describes is “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”.^{vi}

A psychologically healthy existence according to existential analysis requires an ongoing dialogue with the world, life, ourselves as individuals and finally, with the

meanings and values we potentially discover throughout the course of our lives. As dialogical beings we encounter the world and through these experiences of encounter we are motivated to respond. Längle's theory specifically identifies *four existential motivations* that correspond to this continuous dialogue and what our active response might be.

Each of the *four existential motivations* begins with a fundamental question. The first existential motivation centers on an awareness of a discernable and unique *I*. *I exist, I am here, I am in the world*. Although seemingly self-evident, this experiential awareness places a *fundamental question of existence before me* – “*Can I be*”? Do I experience *acceptance, security, protection and support*? Do I feel protected and accepted? Do I feel at home somewhere? Where do I find support in my life? Experiencing acceptance and support from the structures – familial, social and cultural, for example - that surround me lead to feelings of trust in the world and confidence in myself. Positive experiences broaden my capacity for self- acceptance and an embracing of my own existence. They enable me to extend this self-acceptance outward in similar positive attitudes and behaviors toward those around me.

Once we have our space in the world, we fill it with life. According to Längle's second existential motivation we want our existence to have value since it is more than mere fact and this places a *fundamental question of life before me: I am alive, do I truly live*? Do I experience *affection, love and appreciation*? We need to experience *relationship, time and closeness*. Experiences of relationship and closeness to others lead to both internal harmony and harmony with the world. To be loved by another, to experience the closeness of familial love and friendship simultaneously evokes greater capacities within me to extend love, care, compassion and empathy towards others. Again, my active response, the ethical imperative or existential duty is to engage in life by allowing myself to be open, receptive and close to others, to provide the time, space and respect to truly know another person.

The third fundamental motivation places the *question of being (oneself) before me; I am myself, do I feel free to be myself? Do I have the right to be who I am and behave as I do?* Although I am aware of my uniqueness AND of being related to people and to the world, I need to experience *attention, justice, respect and appreciation*. If I

experience appreciation and respect from others and if I am recognized as a valuable and unique individual I become increasingly capable of valuing myself and extending these same attitudes outward by actively appreciating the value of others and the value of world around me. These experiences open greater paths to self-esteem, self-respect and the ability to live authentically. I can live authentically because I experience and affirm the value and dignity of who I am and take that authenticity with me as I dialogue and engage with the world. Therefore my active participation, my active dialogue must be a resounding *yes*, or an *inner consent* that affirms my unique being. I must allow myself to encounter and be engaged with others while simultaneously delineating my own uniqueness and ability to stand on my own. Längle states, “in the midst of this world I discover myself unmistakably”. This third motivation in particular reveals the continuous ethical balancing at the nexus point of self and other, individuality and community. I must, as theologian Paul Tillich stated, have the courage to be and the courage to be a part. This entails the courage to be who I am as a unique and dignified individual and the courage to be part of the world. I must have the courage to engage in the world creatively, compassionately, responsibly. Once again, existential analysis situates psychological health within this very dialogue of self expression, self-awareness and development on the one hand and engagement and relation to the world on the other. Such dialogical activity exercises our most positive human potential.

This ethical foundation carries over into the fourth fundamental existential motivation. It is not enough to find ourselves. We do not live merely for ourselves, we must also transcend our subjectivity, reach out in dialogue in order to find meaning and fulfillment. This puts before us *the fundamental question of the meaning of our existence: I am here – for what purpose? I am part of a meaningful whole, how do I accomplish this?* We need to experience *a field of activity, a structural context and a value to be realized in the future.* Meaning is discovered through engagement and participation. We need to be active members of our community and society. We need to fulfill whatever it is that makes us unique. We need to be part of something, offer our potential as an individual and actively engage in the creative development of the world. We need to set goals, activate our human powers of imagination and creativity. We need to contemplate what might be possible, look towards the future and value the process of

our lives. All of these experiences make us capable of dedication, engagement and action. They provide our lives with meaning and a profound sense of fulfillment. From this arises, according to existential analysis, psychological health. My life, as it is meaningfully fulfilled, is the continuous ethical dialogue that engages my freedom and responsibility, my decisions and actions, my affirmations of and commitment to life. Once again, the relating of dedication, engagement and responsibility to psychological health and well-being acts in concert or dialogue with the ethics of everyday life.

Let me now suggest how this philosophical foundation of existential analysis informs the therapeutic session. Existential analysis adopts a phenomenological approach to therapy, one in which an open dialogue enables the experiences of the patient to “speak for themselves” without the imposition of diagnostic interpretation by the therapist. The therapist and patient encounter each other as two human beings. The therapist enters this dialogue with an ethic of openness, empathy, compassion, care and respect. The therapist must also be open to the encounter and be willing to be moved, touched and altered by the patient’s experiences and unique story. The dialogue offers positive and transformative possibilities for both the patient and therapist. It is through this open dialogical exchange that both patient and therapist are able to glimpse and possibly understand what Längle describes as “the unique essence of an individual”.^{vii} The therapist’s role is ethical in that he or she offers caring, compassionate assistance to another human being, assistance in discovering more authentic and responsible ways of being. The therapeutic dialogue begins with the patient’s story of factual situations and realities, then moves to a reassessment, or emotional re-experiencing of the patient’s encounter with these same realities. What follows is a re-evaluation of those feelings and experiences in light of the present dialogue within therapy, the patient’s experience of the present moment and finally, the creative possibilities that emerge for the patient within this spontaneous dialogical encounter. Dialogue, as opposed to clinical interpretation, produces a more realistic assessment and analysis of the complexity, ambiguity and contradictions that characterize human life. Yet existential analysis also upholds a vision of health that is discovered through purposeful, positive ethical participation in community. Emmy van Deurzen calls this approach or therapeutic posture as “neither

directive nor non-directive, but directional, purposeful and searching instead. It will be an interactional, reciprocal approach, in which human problems are debated”^{viii}.

As may be evident by now, psychological health, from an existential analytic perspective, is a continuous process involving the weighing of and deliberation about who we can and should be. It involves an ethical balancing between the intrapersonal and interpersonal. As human beings we need “fellowship, mutual support, creative engagement, artistic imagination” all of which are “essential to human dignity”^{ix} and which we acquire through experience, openness, and meaningful work we purposely engage in and offer as our contributions to the world. We need structure in our lives and contexts in which we experience the value of contribution and connection. Existential analysis posits the enormous value to our individual psychological health of our active and dialogic engagement in the world around us. The fulfillment and meaning we experience through that engagement evokes further goals we place in front of us and the things we strive for evoke further feelings of hope, trust, care, compassion and faith in the future. These experiences in turn make us capable of responsible dedication and ethical action. A psychotherapy that delves into the meaning of our individual decisions, attitudes and responses opens our psychological development to include the ethical implications of our individual freedom and the scope of our responsibility. The ethical dilemma Tillich spotted in the relation between self-affirmation and love towards others finds a solution in Längle’s concept of existential duty, to respond to life and not to turn away, to choose the good in life, the compassionate, to balance “personal existence in community”^x. Existential analysis is a positive theoretical framework that enables us to link tangible every day ethical issues of relatedness, belongingness, responsibility, community, care, compassion and social justice with broader definitions of individual psychological health, well-being and development.

ⁱ P. Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1980, 22.

ⁱⁱ Dr Alfred Längle, M.D., PhD is an analyst in private practice in Vienna, Austria. He developed the theory of Existential Analysis and is founder and president of the International Society for Logotherapy and Existential Analysis. Dr. Längle is professor of clinical psychology in Moscow (HSE), co-director of the Institute of Fundamental Questions in Psychology at Lomonossov University in Moscow and professor of psychotherapy at Klagenfurt University in Austria. He teaches frequently at universities in South America and Canada. He lectures and gives training seminars in the practice of existential analysis throughout many European countries, the United States and Canada. My knowledge of existential analysis comes from

extensive research for my dissertation completed in 2006, from lectures, seminars and conference workshops Dr. Längle conducted and which I attended between 2002 and 2005 and, correspondence and meetings with Dr. Längle between 2002 and present.

ⁱⁱⁱ A. Längle, “The Art of Involving the Person – Fundamental Motivations as the Structure of the Motivational Process”, in *European Psychotherapy*, Vol. 4 No. 1 (2003): 51.

^{iv} A. Längle, 50.

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

^{vi} Längle, “The Search for Meaning in Life and the Fundamental Existential Motivations”, 29.

^{vii} A. Längle, “Existential Fundamental Motivation”, 1. Paper presentation 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.

^{viii} E. van Deurzen, *Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness*, Sage Publications, London, 2009, 35.

^{ix} I. Barbour, *Ethics in an Age of Technology*, HarperSanFrancisco, New York, 1993, p.56.

^x Barbour, 261.