

Existential Fundamental Motivations



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Existential fundamental motivation¹

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The motivation of people as autonomous and responsible subjects takes place within a characteristic existential framework, which is constituted from certain prerequisites. These consist in an emotionally free (decided) stand towards the world, towards one's own life, toward one's own identity (authenticity) and towards one's own greater context in which one sees one's activities and from which one derives their sense. – Existence can be seen as a continuous dialogue (preoccupation) with these themes which form the foundation of a fulfilled life. Hence people are always motivated to gain, improve or protect these supporting and fulfilling elements. Therefore the striving for these contents represent the fundamental existential motivations. These four existential motivations have many implications. They form in a clinical context a matrix of psychopathological disorders and provide a practical background for clinical interventions. They represent the structure model for modern Existential Analytical Psychotherapy.

1.) Introduction

Some introductory remarks may be helpful at the beginning to ease the entering into this field of psychotherapeutic thinking. The existential-phenomenological approach is in my experience very unusual for those scientists and practitioners who are accustomed to work with data, figures and statistics and who therefore look more at manuals, questionnaires and empirically proven techniques.

The greatest difficulty of this approach seems to arise for most people from its use of a *paradigm* contrary to the actual mainstream of teaching and thinking: the phenomenological approach (Heidegger 1975, 1996; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Spiegelberg 1972). – What is so unusual with *phenomenology*²? - For many people the most unusual of this paradigm lies at a first glimpse in its procedure of “verifying the data” which does not seem as being “scientific” since it is not “objective”. In fact, phenomenology tries to ensure its findings by using the subjective intelligence, feeling and sensing, which the old Greek called “*nous*”. This is the individual capacity of understanding and for evidence and needs dialogical exchange. To

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² One should be aware that the term „phenomenology“ is nowadays often used in not a quite correct way for denominating pure *description*. This can be taken as a beginning of phenomenology but not as its essence.

come along with this it implies a trained viewing of the facts as they are and as they show themselves to be. Phenomena (“things”) are “speaking to us” and they “speak themselves” (Heidegger). If we don’t give way to that we are already manipulating them, trying to control or to possess them. This phenomenological attitude implies to let aside all judgements, theories and knowledge (this activity is called “epoché”). To ascertain the findings one cannot objectify the results by measures – this can be done in addition but does not relate to its proper objective – but by the dialogical proof of having understood well.

In short we could say: *phenomenology results in understanding the subjective, individual, unique* – the “essence” and its specific way to be related and to appear in the world. It may be applied in our context to a person, to a situation or to a sentence, to a gesture. *Natural science* on the other hand results in *measuring the objective (as opposite to subjective), common, general, statistical* – the laws which lay behind the reality and which can be thought as binding together the single facts.

What I am going to present here are phenomenological findings and as such they are related to the subjective, to one’s own experience. Moreover these findings are presented in a phenomenological way: just giving directions through which we can look to our existential reality. By the way this is in our opinion the best way for what Jeffrey Binder was concluding today in his keynote address as being the essential for an effective psychotherapeutic work: to develop and train one’s *intuition*.

Our approach being phenomenological has as a consequence the central theme of existential psychotherapy being the essence of the person: his free will. The human potential to decide represents the basic tool for a fulfilling existence. So existential psychotherapy is focussed in mobilizing and implying the person’s decisiveness and is working mainly with this tool and preparing its prerequisites.

After these introductory remarks let me now give you a short overview on the task of existential analytical psychotherapy and then move on to the structure of existence as a basic understanding for psychopathology and practical work. This model is useful for all different approaches of psychotherapies and is finally that what lies behind our statistical data and ultimately gives them their life.

2.) Existential analytical approach

For Viktor Frankl (1973, 62), the founder of existential analysis (and moreover of logotherapy), the general key to existence is laying in a specific *attitude* towards the world. It

is the attitude that life is asking us questions, every day, every hour, every minute – and we are to give our answer to these questions of the situation. We are “questioned, questioned by life”, questioned by the facts asking us: “What are you going to do with it? – How will you relate to them?” The essential of our life is depending on our answers to the demands and questions the single situations are bringing up.

This attitude is in fact a *phenomenological* attitude, a pure *openness* of the mind without any personal interest, pure looking for the need or essence of the situation, letting one reached or even captured by it.

Frankl’s key to meaning is a more *philosophical* approach, elaborating the appropriate attitude and subsequently providing the necessary substance or “grain” for a fulfilling existence.

Seen more from the inside, i.e. seen more from a *psychological* point of view, we can describe the key for a fulfilling existence in finding a way of living with *inner consent* to what we do, to what we commit or omit.

In other words: to live with inner consent means that there is a continuous activity. It consists in a *double dialogue*: the one directed towards the *outside* with the question: What appeals me? What attracts or challenges me? Where am I needed, what do I want to do in this situation? E.g. here – is what I hear interesting for me, challenging me, talking to me in a way so that I see what I can do with it? – If this is not the case I would say I am probably not in the outer dialogue.

The other side of the dialogue runs *inwardly*. Whatever I decide to do – I cannot leave myself aside, if I want to experience my existence (and find meaning). We therefore always live with the question if we do *agree* with our decision. To put it more concretely, this inner agreement is a process of contacting the deepest feelings which are arising in any situation. We have to take them seriously. I am not speaking about anxiety, mood, delight or the like, they, too, have their meaning, but about the most inward movement. If these deepest and freest emotions correspond to our intentions and plans then we live with inner consent, our inwardly felt or spoken “yes”. With such an agreement with what we do, we stand by ourselves and realize ourselves by fulfilling the corresponding demand of the situation, the demand of the other or ourselves.

This process can be taken as the shortest *description of Existential Analysis* and possibly of existential psychotherapy in general: to help man to find a way of living where he can give his inner consent to his own actions.

A *scientifically definition* of Existential Analysis describes it as a phenomenological-personal psychotherapy with the aim of enabling a person to experience his life *freely* at the spiritual and emotional levels, to arrive at *authentic* decisions and to come to a *responsible* way of dealing with himself and the world around. (Längle 1993, 1995, 1999a) .

3. The four fundamental conditions for fulfilled existence

If we scrutinize phenomenologically the themes we are concerned with throughout our entire life they turn out to be an offspring of *four fundamental realities*. This was the main empirical

and theoretical result of our phenomenological psychotherapeutic work of the last 20 years. As persons with a bright spirit and a need of understanding we are essentially confronted with

- the **world** in its factuality and potentiality
- **life** with its network of relationships and its feelings
- **being oneself** as a unique, autonomous **person**
- the **future** shaped by oneself = *development* through one's activities

Human existence is based on these fundamental realities – they are the four **cornerstones of existence** according to the modern existential analytical theory.

They can be called “existential” for one central reason: they claim our own *inner position* towards them. They ask for our decision on how we want to relate to them, thus challenging our activity and our response to change and work on our reality until we can give our inner consent – a consent which we give no longer merely to what we do but also to what we live. There is, of course, always the possibility to *fail*, to founder and to fall into groundlessness, emotional death, loneliness and the feeling of absurdity. The tragedy pertains to human existence. But these cornerstones offer on the other hand a chance to relate to and to entrust ourselves to their structures and contents which in their depth lead to spiritual layers lying behind, underneath or above all human reality (Längle 2001).

As the structure of human existence these realities are basically involved in *every motivation* and can therefore also be called the “fundamental existential motivations” (Längle 1992, 1993, 1994a, 1997, 1998a,b,c, 1999a,b, 2002b). Any motivation implicates inner consent and agreement, besides cognition, feeling values and meaning (Längle 2002b).

As existential basics they are important in all relations where the person stands in the center: education, pastoral counselling, management trainings, prevention of diseases, coaching, organisational structures etc.

4. The *first* fundamental condition for a fulfilled existence

The first condition arises from the simple *fact that I am here at all*, that I am in the world. But where to go from here? Can I cope with my being there? Do I understand it? - I am there, and as an old German saying from the 12th century goes in free translation: “I don't know where I am from, I don't know where to, I wonder why I am so glad.” I am there, there is me – how is that even possible? Questioning this seemingly self-evident fact can go to great depth, once I go into it. And if I really think about it, I realize that I cannot truly comprehend this. My existence appears like an island in an ocean of ignorance and of connections that surpass me.

The most adequate and traditional attitude towards the incomprehensible is one of *astonishment*. Basically, I can only be astonished that I am here at all.

But I am here, which puts *the fundamental question of existence* before me: **I am - can I be?** Can I claim my place in this world under the *conditions* and with the *possibilities* I have? This demands three things: *protection, space and support*. - Do I enjoy *protection*, acceptance, do I feel at home somewhere? - Do I have enough *space* for being there? – Where do I find *support* in my life? - If this is not the case, the result will be *restlessness, insecurity and fear*. But if I *do* have these three things, I will be able to feel *trust* in the world and *confidence* in myself, maybe even *faith* in God. The sum of these experiences of trust is the fundamental trust, the trust in whatever I feel as being the last support in my life.

But, in order to be there, it is not enough to find protection, space and support – I also have to *seize* these conditions, to make a decision in their favour, to accept them. My *active* part in this fundamental condition of being there is to *accept* the positive sides and to endure the negative ones. To *accept* means to be ready to occupy the space, to rely on the support and to trust the protection; in short “to be there” and not to flee. To *endure* means the force to let be whatever is difficult, menacing or unalterable and to “tolerate” what cannot be changed. Life imposes certain conditions on me, and the world has its laws, to which I must bend myself. This idea is expressed in the word “subject” in the sense of “not independent”. On the other hand, these conditions are reliable, solid and steady. To let them be, to accept them as given is only possible, if I can be at the same time. Therefore, to *accept means to let each other be*, because there is still enough space for me, and the circumstances do not menace me anymore. Man procures himself the space he needs with his ability to endure and to accept conditions. – If this is not the case, *psychodynamics* take over the guidance in the form of coping *reactions*, which are to secure life (Längle 1998a).

Each fundamental motivation has four types of *coping reactions*: the *basic reaction type* – here this would be avoidance or flight; the *paradoxical reaction type or activism* – here this would be overactivity like fighting bacteria by compulsive washing; the third type of coping reaction is a specific *aggression* (Längle 1998b) – here it would be a destructive aggression such as hate; the last type of coping reaction is a *reflex of freezing*, of death imitation with paralysis – here denial or pretending to be non-existent. If these coping reactions do not suffice fear and anxiety arise.

5. The *second* fundamental condition for a fulfilled existence

Once someone has his space in the world, he can fill it with life. Simply being there is not enough. We want our existence to be *good*, since it is more than a mere fact. It has a “pathic

dimension”, which means that it does not simply happen, but that we experience and suffer or enjoy it. Being alive means to cry and to laugh, to experience joy and suffering, to go through pleasant and unpleasant things, to be lucky or unlucky and to experience worth and worthlessness. As much as we can be happy, as deeply can we suffer, and vice-versa. The amplitude of emotionality is equal in both directions, whether this suits us or not.

Therefore I am confronted with *the fundamental question of life*: **I am alive – do I like this fact?** Is it **good** to be there? It is not only strain and suffering that can take away the joy of life. It may as well be the shallowness of daily life and the negligence in one’s life style that make life stale. In order to seize my life, to love it, I need three things: *relationship, time and closeness*. Do I have *relationships*, in which I feel closeness, for which I spend time and in which I experience community? – What do I take *time* for? Do I take time for valuable things, worthy to spend my time for? To take time for something means to give away a part of one’s life while spending it with someone or something. - Can I feel close and maintain *closeness* to things, plants, animals and people? Can I admit the closeness of someone else? – If relationships, closeness and time are lacking, *longing* will arise, then *coldness* and finally *depression*. But if these three conditions are fulfilled, I experience myself as being in *harmony with the world and with myself* and I can sense the depth of life. These experiences form the *fundamental value*, the most profound *feeling for the value* of life. In each experience of value this fundamental value is touched upon, it colours the emotions and affects and represents our yardstick for anything we might feel to be of worth. To this correlation relates our theory of emotion as well as the theory of values.

Still, it is not enough to have relationships, time and closeness. My own *consent*, my active participation are asked for. I seize life, engage in it, when I *turn to* other people, to things, animals, intellectual work or to myself, when I go towards it, get close, get into touch or pull it towards me. If I turn to a loss, *grief* arises. This “to turn to” will make life vibrate within me. If life is to make me move freely, my consent to being touched is necessary.

The basic *coping reaction* on this level is *regression*. The activism here is *overprotection* or *achievement*, typical forms of combating evil; the typical aggression is *fury*, rage which does not lead to destruction, but wants to agitate the other person with the impulse to obtain or to improve the relationship. *Resignation* reaction of feigned death paralyzed half-way. If these reactions cannot neutralize the problem or the loss, depression arises.

6. The *third* fundamental condition for a fulfilled existence

As pleasant as this emotional swinging may be, it is still not sufficient for a fulfilling existence. In spite of my being related to life and to people, I am aware of my being separate, different. There is a singularity that makes me an “I” and distinguishes me from everybody else. I realize that I am on my own, that I have to master my existence myself and that, basically, I am alone and maybe even solitary. But, besides, there is so much more that is equally singular. The diversity and uniqueness in all of this make the beauty of the things and make me feel respect.

In the midst of this world, I discover myself unmistakably, I am with myself and I am *given to* myself. This puts before me the *fundamental question of being a person*: **I am myself – may I be like this? Do I feel free to be like that?** Do I have the **right** to be what I am and to behave as I do? – This is the plane of identity, of knowing oneself and of ethics. In order to succeed here, it is necessary to have experienced three things: *attention, justice and appreciation*. – By whom am I *seen*? Who considers my uniqueness and respects my *boundaries*? – Do people *justice* to me? – For what am I *appreciated* – for what can I appreciate myself? – If these experiences are missing, *solitude* will be the result, *hysteria* as well as a need to hide behind the *shame*. If, on the contrary, these experiences have been made, I will find myself, find my authenticity, my relief and my self-respect. The sum of these experiences builds *one’s own worth*, the profoundest worth of what identifies my own self at its core: the *self-esteem*.

In order to be able to be oneself, it is not enough to simply experience attention, justice and appreciation. I also have to say “yes to myself”. This requires again my *active* participation: to *look* at other people, to *encounter* them and, at the same time, to *delimitate* myself and to stand by my own, but to *refuse* whatever does not correspond to myself. *Encounter and regret* are the two means by which we can live our authenticity without ending up in solitude. Encounter represents the necessary bridge to the other, brings me out of the possible isolation, makes me find his essence as well as my own “I” in the “you”. Thus I create for myself the appreciation requisite for feeling entitled to be what I am.

The *coping reactions* of this motivation are: *distancing* oneself as the basic reaction, *stubborn insistence* and leading a *functional* life as form of activism. The typical aggressive reaction consists in indignation, *annoyance* – anger, reproach. The freezing type of reaction at this level are *dissociation* of the bodily integrity, dividing and splitting of emotion and cognition. If these reactions don’t suffice to neutralize the hurt, histrionic symptoms and/or personality disorders arise.

7. The *fourth* fundamental condition for a fulfilled existence

If I can be there, love life and find myself therein, the conditions are fulfilled for the fourth fundamental condition of existence: the recognition of what my life is all about. It does not suffice to simply be there and to have found oneself. In a sense, we have to transcend ourselves, if we want to find fulfillment and to be fruitful. Otherwise we would live as if in a house where nobody ever visits.

Thus the transience of life puts before us the *question of meaning of our existence*: **I am there – for what is it good?** For this three things are needed: *a field of activity, a structural context and a value to be realized in the future*. – Is there a place where I feel *needed*, where I can be productive? – Do I see and experience myself in a *larger context* that provides structure and orientation to my life? Where I want to be integrated? – Is there anything that *should still be realized* in my life?

If this is not the case, the result will be a feeling of *emptiness, frustration, even despair* and frequently *addiction*. If, on the contrary, these conditions are met, I will be capable of *dedication and action* and, finally, of my own form of *religious belief*. The sum of these experiences add up to the meaning of life and leads to a sense of fulfillment.

If man fails systematically to reach meaning, his *coping reactions* will be a *provisional attitude* towards life as basic reaction, together with a “*planless, day-to-day attitude toward life*” and “*collective thinking*” (Frankl 1973, XVI), *idealisation* and *fanaticism* as main forms of activism, *aggressive games* and *cynicism*. Fatalism (Frankl 1973, XVI), *loss of interest, apathy* and probably *nihilism* can be seen as forms of freezing reactions. Disorders at this level mainly lead to addictions.

But it does not suffice to have a field of activity, to have one’s place within a context and to know of values to be realized in the future. Instead, the phenomenological attitude is needed which we spoke about at the beginning. This *attitude of openness* represents the *existential access* to meaning in life: that dealing with the questions put before me in each situation (Frankl 1973, XV): “What does this hour want from me, how shall I respond?” The meaningful thing is not only what **I** can expect from life, but, in accordance with the dialogical structure of existence, it is equally important what *life wants from me* and what the moment expects *from me* and what **I** could and should do *now* for others as well as for myself. My *active* part in this attitude of openness is to bring myself into correspondence with the situation, to examine whether what I am doing is really a good thing: for others, for myself, for the future, for my environment. If I act accordingly, my existence will be fulfilling.

We define meaning as “the most valuable, realistic possibility of the given situation, for which I feel I should decide myself”. *Existential meaning* is therefore what is possible here

and now, on the basis of facts and reality. It is reduced to what is actually possible for the single person. The object may be anything I *need*, or whatever is the *most pressing, valuable or interesting* now. To define and redefine this continually is an extremely complex task for which we possess an inner organ of perception capable of reducing this complexity to livable proportions: our sensitivity as well as the moral conscience.

Besides this existential meaning there is an *ontological* meaning. This is the *overall meaning* in which I find myself and which does not depend on me. It is the philosophical and religious meaning, the meaning the creator of the world must have had in mind. I can perceive it in divination and in faith (cf. Längle 1994b for the differentiation between the two forms of meaning).

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