

# **Existentialism and Psychoanalysis: From Antiquity to Postmodernism**

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The term “existentialism” is so ambiguous that it has essentially become a meaningless word: it is associated with a number of disparate philosophical doctrines, social-political movements, and artistic sensibilities, that it becomes slippery to pin down its core philosophical tenets to such a degree that an undertaking of this kind would be no less rendered moot. We may nevertheless say that existentialism is a form of phenomenological philosophy that relies on certain reflective methods of studying human consciousness instantiated in the individual, society, and culture, which emerged as a popular general movement characteristic of 20<sup>th</sup> century European thought represented across many disciplines including literature, the humanities, and the social sciences.

Sartre is often heralded the father of existentialism, but surely philosophical preoccupation with the question and meaning of human existence dates back to antiquity. In philosophy there is often a distinction made between the nature of “being,” a broad ontological category, and that of “existence,” what we generally confine to the study of human subjectivity. From the Platonic notion of the soul to mediaeval Aristotelian theology, to modern materialism and transcendental idealism, there has always been a primary fascination with the longings and mysteries of human experience.

Sartre (1943) formally inaugurated the existential movement with its first principle in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness* when he stated that “existence precedes essence.” What he meant was that existence is prior to essence, and that essence is what man makes of his life through

his lived subjective concrete acts. But this dictum goes back to Descartes (1641) three centuries earlier in his *Meditations* where he avows that “I am, I exist” (p. 17). The cogito knows itself to be necessarily and indubitably true whenever it puts itself forward or is conceived in the mind. Hence Descartes showed that we know that we exist long before we know who or what we are in our essence. Even the mediaevalists believed in the necessity of starting with the experiential givens of the sensuous world and then proceeding by induction and abstraction to the ultimate intuitive awareness of unchanging essences and internal truths—thus if anyone was an existentialist, it was surely St. Thomas (Grene, 1948). And here enters modernism. All modern philosophers from Descartes to Kant were preoccupied with the reconciliation between nature and mind, science and religion, self and society, and causality and freedom, thus giving rise to the late modern philosophies of the will and our continued preoccupation with the transcendence of the ego. For Fichte (1794), the father of German Idealism, the absolute self-positing self was a pure assertion—*I!* Schopenhauer (1818) was so enamored with the I that he believed it was the foundation for that which is both determined and that which is determining, thus *The World as Will and Representation*—the fundamental reality is will, a will that suffers. And Hegel (1807, 1817) meticulously argues that *Geist* is a self-articulated process of becoming: essence must appear in order for anything to exist, hence to be made actual (see 1807, p. 89; 1817, p. 199).

What does this all have to do with psychoanalysis? Everything! Anxiety and death, alienation and responsibility, meaning and possibility—the very ontological conditions that inform human subjectivity as both normative and pathological. For Kierkegaard, we live in extreme anxiety and trembling over death and dread, and despair over who we are, the very thing that defines our being, the very thing that orients us toward our future, hence our possibilities; and for

Kierkegaard, that meant the ethical and spiritual life of man. Nietzsche also could not tolerate the herd mentality, where truth was far from being found in “the crowd;” but unlike Kierkegaard, he saw life as meaningless and in need of nihilistic revolt, of the transvaluation of values—to create oneself afresh—though a will to power. But the single most unremitting question for our existential man is the nature of freedom. Sartre was an extremist: human subjectivity was radical freedom, the unabated obligation to choose how one is to be. For Sartre (1943), we are condemned to freedom—we cannot not choose, or else we plummet into self-deception or bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). The human being is not a thing, but a process of transcendence that must seize upon its freedom in order to become and define itself via its authentic choices. Psychopathology is a failure to seize upon one’s freedom. Sartre’s magnum opus is a treatise on existential analysis, and in many ways shares affinities with psychoanalysis, but he had one beef: Sartre could not accept nor tolerate the idea of an unconscious mind because it fractured his very thesis that we are all unconditionally self-determining. How could we be free if choice was governed by alien forces from within? Despite enjoying wide popularity, perhaps for this single attack on Freud, Sartre was not destined to find many followers among psychoanalysts of his day.

It was with Heidegger (1927) that existential analysis began to find a broader voice, and this was largely due to the dissemination of his thought by Swiss psychiatrists, Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss. Heidegger’s influential work, *Being and Time*, one of the most celebrated texts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is essentially about the throws of human existence, what he refers to as *Dasein*—the concretely existing human being who is there in the world. *Dasein* has a relationship with itself, others, and its environment which is constitutive of its facticity—as a being thrown into a preexisting social ontology. Like Sartre, Heidegger was preoccupied with explicating the essential

elements of human existence as being in relation to its own struggles with anxiety and death, freedom and inauthenticity, and transcendence as a temporal phenomena of seizing one's possibilities. Like Sartre's notion of bad faith, Heidegger showed that human beings have a propensity for being neurotic and living in self-deception as the fallen *Das Man*, those who gravitate toward the herd and fail to live their lives genuinely. But as with Sartre, Heidegger could neither accept the primacy of the unconscious nor the governing causality it implicitly brings forth in our conscious lives. And here, in my opinion, is a cardinal reason why existentialism remains foreclosed and underappreciated by the psychoanalytic community. While psychoanalysis underscores the primacy and ubiquity of unconscious mentation, existentialism cannot bear to have its freedom curtailed.

But this did not stop existential analysis from flourishing in Europe, and to some extent in the United States, at least for a time. The novelists, poets, journalists, and playwrights, from Dostoevsky to Rilke, Kafka, Ortega, and Camus, many of which were contemporaries of Sartre and Heidegger,

swept-over the masses, also drawn to the philosophical-religious aspirations of Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Tillich, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, and Erich Fromm; and in the field of mental health, Jaspers, Binswanger, Boss, Bally, Laing, Saasz, Van den Berg, Frankl, Minkowski, Ellenberger, Rollo May, and Yalom, just to name a few, did much to pave the way toward appreciating existential analysis and phenomenological psychopathology. In fact, Boss and Bally were classically trained analysts, while Binswanger, although in Switzerland, became a member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society at Freud's recommendation when the Zurich group split off from the International (May, 1983); although many existential therapists were under Jungian influence.

In the States, there was much more interest in existential analysis during the 1950's, perhaps in part due to burgeoning interest in humanism, social political thought, critical theory and neo-Marxism, the marginalized anti-psychiatry movement, the backlash against positivism, the seduction of Eastern spirituality, and the dehumanization of industrialized, materialistic culture. In the end, existentialism remains a multitudinous set of precepts, some systematized, but mainly recalcitrant to systematic reduction. But one irrefutable premise is that we as subjective agents are never static or inert creatures, rather we are a process of becoming, an observation made by the ancients from Heraclitus to Laotzue.

One could argue that psychoanalysis has always been an existential enterprise, and nowhere do we see this more poignantly realized than in Freud. Freud's entire metapsychology could be said to be an existential treatise on the scope, breadth, and limits to human freedom. Freud was profoundly engaged with the questions of life and death, determinism and choice, self and other, alienation and causality, so much so that his mature model of the mind is none other than a return to the Greek concept of the soul. As I have argued elsewhere (Mills, 2002, 2003b), Freud never actually used the words 'ego' and 'id' in his German texts; these are English translations into Latin taken from one of his most famous works, *Das Ich und das Es* (1923). When Freud spoke of the *Ich*, he was referring to the personal pronoun 'I'—as in 'I myself'—a construct that underwent many significant theoretical transformations throughout his lifetime. By the time Freud advanced his mature paradigm of the psyche, concluding that even a portion of the *I* was also unconscious, he needed to delimit a region of the mind that remained purely concealed from consciousness. This he designated by the impersonal pronoun *es* which he used as a noun—the *It*, a term originally appropriated from Nietzsche. The translation *ego*, displaces the deep emotional significance tied

to personal identity that Freud deliberately tried to convey, while the term *id* lacks the customary sense of unfamiliarity associated with otherness, thus rendering these concepts antiseptic, clinical, and devoid of all personal associations. The *I* and the *It* expresses more precisely the type of antithesis Freud wanted to emphasize between the familiar and the strange, hence the dialectic of the life within.

When we refer to ourselves as ‘I,’ we convey a meaning that is deeply personal, subjective, and known, while references to an ‘It’ convey distance, separateness, objectification, and abstraction. The *I* is familiar while the *It* is foreign and unknown, hence an alien presence. Because Freud wanted to preserve the individual intimacy associated with a personal sense of self, the *I* was to stand in firm opposition to the *It* which was purely estranged from conscious awareness. When Freud (1905) refers to the mind, he is referring to the Greek notion *psyche*, which corresponds to the German term *Seele*. In fact, Freud does not speak of the ‘mental apparatus’ at all, rather the ‘organization of the soul’ which he specifically equates with the *psyche*. Well read in ancient philosophy, Plato’s notion of the soul, as well as his depiction of Eros, left a lasting impression on Freud’s conceptualization of the *psyche*. Freud realized that he could not adequately account for the *I* as being solely conscious, and therefore introduced a division between conscious and unconscious ego domains and their respective operations. The ego became a pivotal concept for Freud because it was the locus of agency, intention, and choice both consciously and unconsciously realized; however an agency that existed alongside competing agencies in the mind.

For Freud, the *It* is *alienus*—both alienated mind and that which is alienating. We know it as conflict and chaos under the pressure, whims, and persecutory impulses of the drives, our animal nature. Yet such chaos by necessity is combated by degrees of order from the ego. Freud’s

introduction of the It preserves that realm of inner reality we may never directly know in itself. Here Freud insists on the Kantian *Ding an sich*, the Fichtean *Anstoss*—an impenetrable limit, obstacle, or impasse. The mind becomes demarcated by a rigid ‘check’ that introduces irreconcilable division and contradiction; in other words, dialectic.

Freud’s (1923, 1926, 1933) final paradigm of the mind rests on a basic logic of modification. The I differentiates itself and develops out of the It; and later, the I modifies itself again and evolves into a critical-moral agency, what Freud calls the *Über-Ich*, or that aspect of the I which stands over against itself and holds itself up to a higher authority. Here the I undergoes another doubling function, in fact, a doubling of the doubling—this time turned onto itself. What is familiarly known as the *superego* is nothing other than a split off portion of the I that stands in relation to a particular form of identification: namely, a set of values and prohibitions it internalized from familial relations and cultural experience, ideals and principles the self strives to attain.

In the end, Freud gives us a vision of the mind as composed of three ontically interrelated forces with varying qualitative degrees of organization and zest ranging from the most primitive, unmodulated evolutionary impulses to the most refined aspects of intelligence and ethical self-consciousness—all brought together under the rubric of soul. Freud’s tripartite division of the soul returns us to the Greek vision of the psyche with one exceptional difference: the soul is largely unconscious. As the seat of the passions (*eros*), reason (*nous*), and moral judgment (*ethos*), the psyche becomes a dynamic organization of competing dialectical forces. Because the notion of consciousness is a modern—not an ancient—concept, Freud is able to enrich the Platonic view by showing that irrationality and emotional forces driven by unconscious processes constantly plague the intellectual and ethical strivings of the ego. But what Freud is capable of showing that the

existentialists and phenomenologists refuse to accept, is that the unconscious is also self-determining, hence the coming to presence and actualization of freedom.

Now we seem to live in a postmodern time of skepticism concerning the existence of the self (see Frie, 2003; Mills, 2003a). While postmodernism has no unified body of theory, one unanimous claim is the demise of the subject. Although postmodern thought has propitiously criticized the pervasive historical, gendered, and ethnocentric character of our understanding of the world, it has done so at the expense of displacing several key modern philosophical tenets that celebrate the nature of subjectivity, consciousness, and the teleology of the will. Consequently, the transcendental notions of freedom, autonomy, and authentic choice that comprise the fundamental activities of personal agency are altogether dismantled.

In the empirically driven world of contemporary scientific psychology, postmodernism may appear as an interesting yet marginalized phenomenon. In this sense it shares the eccentricity historically associated with existential, phenomenological, and psychoanalytic accounts that have fought for recognition from traditional psychological paradigms. However, within the larger intellectual community that comprises the humanities and behavioral sciences, we may observe a divide between science on the one side, and postmodernism on the other, each with its purported critics and adherents. Yet strangely enough, scientific and postmodern approaches yield similar implications for the fate of the self. Because scientific psychology is largely entrenched in empirically and biologically based materialistic frameworks, the dynamic activities of mind—including consciousness, cognition, and subjectivity—are imperiled by reductionist strategies. While postmodernism boasts to have subverted the subject, materialists have reduced it to a brain state. Either way, subjectivity, selfhood, and personal agency are displaced.

Eclipsed by postmodernism, psychoanalysis is even beset from within its own discipline. Hell bent on displacing classical psychoanalysis, the relational schools, or what has been called the American Middle Group, is content with chucking Freud altogether, while in my view, this movement is mainly a re-invention of the analytic wheel. While Freud has been largely discarded in the States, albeit subsumed by the rest of the world, relational and intersubjective schools are at least turning to philosophy to find a fresh breath of ideas, despite it merely being a return of old paradigms under a new guise. Contemporary psychoanalysis may become a friend to existential thought, for it is much more open to developing an appreciation for philosophy in general. With the recent translation of Heidegger's *Zollikon Seminars*, given at Boss's invitation to the psychiatrists of Zurich over a ten-year period between 1959-1969, we may anticipate renewed interest in reiterating the question of *Dasein* in the consulting room. But how is Heidegger as a professor of psychiatry? Let us look at a brief passage from his *Seminars*.

Heidegger: How does Dr. R. relate to the table before him?

Listener A: He is sitting behind it and looking at it.

Heidegger: At one with this, the "nature" of Dr. R.'s *Dasein* also reveals itself—but as what?

[Five minutes of silence]

Heidegger: I remain silent because it is senseless to want to lecture you about Dr. R.'s existing. Everything depends on your learning to *see* the matter for yourselves, that you are patiently attentive to the matter, so that it may reveal itself to you in the totality of its own proper meaningfulness.

Listener C: Dr. R is separated from the table by an interval of space.

Heidegger: What, then, is space?

Listener D: The distance between Dr. R. and the table.

Heidegger: What is distance?

Listener E: A definition of space.

Heidegger: What, then, is space as such?

[Ten long minutes of silence . . .] (see Boss, 1978-79, pp. 10-11).

Well, from this example, perhaps I am a little overly optimistic that Daseinsanalysis will make a come-back; but I am still rather hopeful. Nevertheless, existential, phenomenological, and continental perspectives in philosophy complement psychoanalytic discourse, thus providing a fecundity of overlap in conceptual thought and practice that the relational schools have been increasingly acknowledging over the past two decades. It can be said that psychoanalysis is fundamentally a theory and method geared toward insight, truth, and the amelioration of human suffering, while philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom, truth, human excellence, and rational meaning, what Freud (1927, 1930) himself identifies as *Logos*. I see these two disciplines as embracing similar convictions that human existence is ultimately about developing our potential, fulfilling our possibilities, and living an authentic life through the liberation of ignorance and the malicious forces that threaten our happiness. This takes courage and fortitude, but it first and foremost takes awareness. In this way, therapy is a *liberation struggle*—Know thyself! This Delphic decree is the psychoanalytic motto. Insight or self-knowledge takes a commitment to educating oneself to what truly lies within—the complexity and competing flux of the inner world, and this is never an easy

endeavor. It takes another to nurture and draw this out, to validate and reinforce, to encourage and to guide, to hold and reassure. This begins with the most primary of all relations, the relation of the embryonic self to that of its mother, then to its family and community at large, and finally to the social institutions that foster and beget the cultivation of self-consciousness. This is why a relational approach to treatment mirrors the natural process of self-development, for the self is equiprimordially given over to the other, and the other to the self: the subject-object split is foreclosed. Each are dynamically informed by a dialectical system of mutual implication, interaction, exchange, negotiation, and force.

Despite the vogue postmodern trend that displaces personal agency and the self, I have attempted to emphasize that human subjectivity is an indispensable and emergent experiential process of becoming. Heidegger is very clear that “Dasein exists,” not as an epiphenomenon of larger cultural and linguistic forces, but as a subject who emerges within them equiprimordially. Dasein is the subjective human being who lives in a world composed of multiple dynamic organizations that are psychologically, socially, and temporally realized in relation to the past, the present, and future possibilities. And just as Sartre emphasizes our subjectivity as radical freedom, and psychoanalysis as the pursuit of bringing to light that which lies hidden from our immediate conscious awareness, we exist in relation to what we can become. Ultimately in both the existential and psychoanalytic traditions, we can only become more free through knowledge.

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