

LUDWIG BINSWANGER

1881 - 1966

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Woe's me, woe's me!
 The earth bears grain,
 But I Am unfruitful,
 Am discarded shell,
 Cracked, unusable, Worthless husk.
 Creator, Creator,
 Take me back!
 Create me a second time
 And create me better!

Ellen West had always been a little odd. She was a picky eater, and would put up a great resistance if anyone tried to force her to eat something she didn't care for. It was, in fact, her stubbornness that made her stand out. She always had to be first in favorite subjects, and couldn't bear to be home sick. By the time she was a teenager, her motto was "either Caesar or nothing!" But nothing could prepare her or her family for what was to come.

At seventeen, her poetry begins to take a curious turn. One poem, called "Kiss Me Dead," asks the Sea-King to take her into his cold arms and kiss her to death. She throws herself into work, and praises work in her writings as "the blessing of our life." She is fascinated and appalled at the shortness and futility of life.

When she is twenty, she takes a trip to Sicily. She eats heartily and puts on some weight, which her girlfriends tease her about. She responds by fasting and taking vigorous hikes. She becomes obsessed with the idea of being fat, hates herself for it, and starts to view death as a release from her misery.

For a short while, she again buries herself in work and comes out of her depression. But always she carries with her a feeling of dread. She is actively involved in social change, but secretly believes it is all for nothing.

When her parents interfere with her engagement to a student, she goes into a tailspin, and comes home from a resort emaciated and sick. Yet she feels that this obsession with thinness is actually the key to her well-being! When her physician prescribes bed-rest and she gains the weight back, she is despondent, and works hard to get back to her emaciated state.

At twenty-eight, she marries her cousin in the hopes that marriage will help her get rid of her "fixed idea." After a miscarriage, she struggles with the dilemma of wanting a child yet not wanting to eat nourishing food.

She begins to use massive quantities of laxatives. By the time she is thirty-three, she is using 60 or 70 tablets of vegetable laxative a day, vomiting at night and having diarrhea in the daytime. She goes down to 92 pounds and looks like a skeleton.

At this point, she goes to first one, then another, psychiatrist. She makes two unsuccessful attempts at suicide. She is finally sent to the Kreuzlingen Sanatorium, where she stays comfortably, with her husband, and comes under Ludwig Binswanger's care. On a maintenance diet and sedatives, she becomes physically healthier, but continues to feel the oppressive sense of dread.

Because she continues to try to kill herself, she and her husband are given a serious choice: She can be committed to a "closed ward," where she could be expected to deteriorate, or she can be released. They choose release.

At this point, she feels much better, because she knows what she needs to do. She eats happily, even eating some chocolates, and is full for the first time in thirteen years. She talks with her husband, writes some letters to friends -- and takes a lethal dose of poison.

The reason this sad story is one of the more famous case-studies is not so much the problem -- anorexia is, unfortunately, not too uncommon -- or the particular course of events, but the ability that Ellen West had to express her perspective on her own problem, and the fact that her psychiatrist, Ludwig Binswanger, chose to truly listen to her.

Listen to another one of her poems:

I'd like to die just as the birdling does
That splits his throat in highest jubilation;
And not to live as the worm on earth lives on,
Becoming old and ugly, dull and dumb!
No, feel for once how forces in me kindle,
And wildly be consumed in my own fire.

Ellen, somewhere in her childhood, has split her life into two opposing camps: On the one hand there is the "tomb world," which includes her physical and social existence. Her body, with its low needs, distracts her from her purposes. It gets older every day. Her society is bourgeois and corrupt. The people around her seem oblivious to all the evil and all the suffering. In the tomb world, everything is degenerate and degenerating, everything is being pulled down, into the grave, into a hole.

On the other hand there is the "ethereal world," the world of the soul, pure and clean, a world where what needs to be done is done, where acts are effortless because unencumbered by the weight of matter. In the ethereal world, we can be free and fly.

There are some people who try to ignore the "ethereal world." They don't like the anxieties and responsibilities that come with freedom. Some would rather be told what to do, and so join a cult or a gang or a multinational corporation. But they are still frightened, because they know this isn't right. They are not living their life, and so they can never be happy.

Others look to their bodies for direction. They begin by seeking simple pleasures. But they find that the pleasures grow stale. So they try a new drug or a different perversion or a novel thrill. After a while, these don't satisfy, either. They fail, not because the pleasures aren't pleasurable, but because only half of who they are is there.

Ellen West tried to ignore the "tomb world." She wanted to fly above the material and the mundane into the ethereal, into the good and the right and the pure. And, in one small domain, she came close to succeeding: She managed to reduce her body to a skeleton. But it's never enough.

We cannot ignore one part of what we are for the sake of another part. You cannot ignore your body or your soul, or any other aspect of who you are. Like it or not, we are both bird and worm. Anything less is not just not "human;" it's nothing at all!

Biography

Ludwig Binswanger was born April 13, 1881, in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland, into a family already well established in a medical and psychiatric tradition: His grandfather, also named Ludwig, founded Bellevue Sanatorium in Kreuzlingen in 1857. His father, Robert, was the director during the time Anna O. was hospitalized there. And his uncle, Otto, discovered an Alzheimer-like disease still called Binswanger's Disease -- and was one of Frederic Nietzsche's doctors!

The Ludwig Binswanger of this chapter received his M.D. degree from the University of Zurich in 1907. He studied under Carl Jung and assisted Jung with Freudian Society work. Like Jung, he interned under Eugen Bleuler, who coined the term schizophrenia.

Jung introduced Binswanger to Sigmund Freud in 1907. In 1911, Binswanger became the chief medical director at Bellevue Sanatorium. The following year, he became ill and received a visit from Freud, who rarely left Vienna. Their friendship lasted until Freud's death in 1939, despite their fundamental disagreements over theory! In the early 1920's, Binswanger cultivated an interest in Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Martin Buber, and turned increasingly towards an existential rather than Freudian perspective. By the early 1930's, we can honestly say that he was the first truly existential therapist. In 1943, he published his major work *Grundformen und Erkenntnis menschlichen Daseins*, which remains untranslated into English.



In 1956, Binswanger stepped down from his position at Bellevue after 45 years as its chief medical director. He continued to study and write until his death in 1966.

Theory

Existential psychology, like Freudian psychoanalysis, is a "school of thought," a tradition of theory, research, and practice which includes the work of many men and women. Unlike psychoanalysis, however, existential psychology doesn't have a single founder. Instead, it has its roots in the work of a rather diverse group of philosophers of the second half of the nineteenth century, especially Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were as different as night and day, so it's a bit hard to imagine a single school of thought deriving from both. Kierkegaard was interested in restoring a depth of faith to the dry religion of Copenhagen of his day; Nietzsche, on the other hand, is famous for his exclamation "God is dead!" Yet they were more different from the philosophers that preceded them than they were from each other. Both approached philosophy from the standpoint of real people, passionately involved in the difficulties of real life. Both believed that human existence couldn't be captured in complex rational systems, religious or philosophical. Both were closer to being poets than logicians.

Since Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, quite a few philosophers and, more recently, psychologists have tried to clarify, extend, and promote the ideas of existentialism. Many, unfortunately, weren't very good poets, so reading them can be quite painful. But keep in mind that they were swimming against a stream of centuries of highly systematic, rational, logical philosophy, and a psychology reduced to physiology and behavior. What they have to say often seems strange, even strained, exactly because we have learned so well to trust traditional logic and science.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the careful and complete study of **phenomena**, and is basically the invention of the philosopher Edmund Husserl. Phenomena are the contents of consciousness, the things, qualities, relationships, events, thoughts, images, memories, fantasies, feelings, acts, and so on, which we experience. Phenomenology is an attempt to allow these experiences to speak to us, to reveal themselves to us, so we might describe them in as unbiased a fashion as possible.

If you've been studying experimental psychology, this might seem like another way of talking about objectivity. In experimental psychology, as in science generally, we try to get rid of our nasty subjectivity and see things as they truly are. But the phenomenologist would suggest that you can't get rid of subjectivity, no matter how hard you try. The very attempt to be scientific means approaching things from a certain viewpoint -- the scientific viewpoint. You can't get rid of subjectivity because it isn't something separate from objectivity at all.

Most of modern philosophy, including the philosophy of science, is dualistic. This means that it separates the world into two parts, the objective part, usually conceived of as material, and the subjective part, consciousness. Our experiences are then the interaction of this objective and subjective part. Modern science has added to this by emphasizing the objective, material part, and de-emphasizing the subjective part. Some call consciousness an "epiphenomenon," meaning an unimportant by-product of brain chemistry and other material processes, something that is, at best, a nuisance. Others, such as B. F. Skinner, see consciousness as nothing at all.

Phenomenologists suggest that this is a mistake. Everything the scientist deals with comes "through" consciousness. Everything we experience is colored by "the subjective." But a better way to put it is that there is no experience that does not involve both something which is experienced, and something which is experiencing. This idea is called **intentionality**.

So phenomenology asks us to let whatever we are studying -- whether it be a thing out there, or a feeling or thought inside us, or another person, or human existence itself -- to reveal itself to us. We can do this by being open to the experience, by not denying what is there because it doesn't fit our philosophy or psychological theory or religious beliefs. It especially asks us to **bracket** or put aside the question of the objective reality of an experience -- what it "really" is. Although what we study is always likely to be more than what we experience, it is not something other than what we experience.

Phenomenology is also an interpersonal undertaking. While experimental psychology may use a group of subjects so that the subjectivity can be removed from their experiences statistically, phenomenology may use a group of co-researchers so that their perspectives can be added together to form a fuller, richer understanding of the phenomenon. This is called **intersubjectivity**.

This method, and adaptations of this method, have been used to study different emotions, psychopathologies, things like separation, loneliness, and solidarity, the artistic experience, the religious experience, silence and speech, perception and behavior, and so on. It has also been used to study human existence itself, most notably by Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. And that is the basis for existentialism proper.

For more detail on the phenomenological method, see [The Qualitative Methods Workbook](#) (especially Part One)!

Existence

Kierkegaard once compared us with God and, of course, found us lacking. God is traditionally understood as being omniscient, omnipotent, and eternal. We, on the other hand, are abysmally ignorant, pitifully powerless, and all too mortal. Our limitations are clear.

We often wish we could be more like God, or at least like angels. Angels, supposedly, are not as ignorant or powerless as we are, and they are immortal! But, as Mark Twain pointed out, if we were angels, we wouldn't recognize ourselves. Angels do nothing but God's bidding. They can't help it. They simply live out God's plan for them, and for eternity no less!

Tables are more like angels than we are. Tables have a nature, a purpose, an essence, that we have given them. They are there to serve us in a certain way, like angels are there to serve God.

Woodchucks are like this, too. They also have a plan, a blueprint, if you like, in their genetics. They do what their instincts instruct them to do. They seldom require career counseling.

It may be dull to be an angel, or a table, or a woodchuck, but it sure is easy! You could say that their essences come before their existences: What they are comes before what they do.

But, say existentialists, this is not true for us. "**Our existences precede our essences**," as Sartre put it. I don't know what I'm here for until I've lived my life. My life, who I am, is not determined by God, by the laws of Nature, by my genetics, by my society, not even by my family. They each may provide the raw material for who I am, but it is how I choose to live that makes me what I am. I create myself.

If the scientist is the model of humanity for George Kelly and cognitive psychologists, the artist is the model for existentialists.

You could say that the essence of humanity -- the thing that we all share, and makes us distinct from anything else in the world -- is our lack of essence, our "no-thing-ness," our **freedom**. We cannot be captured by a philosophical system or a psychological theory; we cannot be reduced to physical and chemical processes; our futures cannot be predicted with social statistics. Some of us are men, some are women; some are black, some are white; some come from one culture, some from another; some have one imperfection, some another. The "raw materials" differ dramatically, but we all share the task of making ourselves.

Dasein

Binswanger has adopted the terms and concepts introduced by the philosopher Martin Heidegger. The first and foremost term is **Dasein**, which many existentialists use to refer to human existence. Literally, it means "being there," but it carries quite a few more subtle connotations: The ordinary German use of the word suggests continuing existence, persistence, survival. Also, the emphasis is on the "da" or "there," and so has the sense of being in the middle of it all, in the thick of things. The "da" also carries the sense of being there as opposed to being here, as if we were not quite where we belonged, and were straining towards somewhere else.

Although no precise translation exists, many people use the word **existence**, or **human existence**. Existence derives from the Latin ex-sistere, meaning to come, step, or stand out or forth. As you can see, that carries some of the same subtle meanings as Dasein: being different, moving beyond oneself, becoming.

There are still other names for Dasein. Heidegger referred to Dasein as an **openness (Lichtung)**, such as a meadow, an openness in the forest, since it is Dasein that permits the world to reveal itself. Sartre also acknowledges this sense of openness, by referring to human existence as **nothingness**. Like a hole can only exist in contrast to something solid, Dasein stands out in sharp contrast to the "thickness" of everything else.

The main quality of Dasein, according to Heidegger, is **care (Sorge)**. "Being there" is never a matter of indifference. We are involved in the world, in others, and in ourselves. We are committed to or engaged in life. We can do many things, but not to care is not one of them.

Thrownness

Thrownness refers to the fact that we are "thrown" into a universe that is not of our choosing. When we begin choosing our lives, we begin with many choices made for us -- genetics, environment, society, family..., all those "raw materials." A better way of understanding this is that "I," conscious and free, am not really separate from "that," physical and determined.

Think about your body. On the one hand, you are your body, and your body is you. When you want to, you walk, or talk, or look, or listen. You perceive and think and feel and act "with" it, "through" it. It is difficult to conceive of life without it. But in other ways it is like any other "thing." It can resist you. It can fail you. You may lose a limb. You may become ill and lose some function or another. Yet you remain you. Sometimes the world comes into you, such as with an artificial heart or a hip replacement. Sometimes you extend yourself into the world, with a cane, or a telescope, or a telephone. We are caught up in the world and the world in us, and there is no telling where one ends and the other begins.

Thrownness also refers to the fact that we are born into an already-established social world. Our society precedes us, our culture precedes us, our language precedes us, our mothers and fathers precede us. In our helplessness, as infants and children, we must depend on them.

Even as adults, we depend on others. Sometimes, we "fall victim" to "**the Other**," that faceless generalization we often refer to as "people" (as in "people are watching") or "we" (as in "we don't do those things") or "they" (as in "they wouldn't like that"). We forfeit our freedom and allow ourselves to be enslaved by our society. This is called **Fallenness**.

Binswanger, following the philosopher Martin Buber, adds a more positive note to the idea of fallenness: It also allows for "we-ness," for "**I-thou**," and for love. If Dasein is an "opening," we can be open to each other. We are not as "locked away" in ourselves as some existentialists seem to suggest. Binswanger sees this potential as an intrinsic part of Dasein, and even gives it a special place by referring to it as **being-beyond-the-world**.

Anxiety

Existentialists are famous for pointing out that life is hard. The physical world can give us pain as well as pleasure; the social world can lead to heartbreak and loneliness as well as love and affection; and the personal world, most especially, contains anxiety and guilt and the awareness of our own mortality. And these hard things are not merely possibilities in life: They are inevitable.

Being free means making choices. In fact, we are "condemned to choose," as Sartre put it, and the only thing we can't choose is not to choose. We have to choose even though, as Kierkegaard pointed out, we are in fact ignorant, powerless, and mortal, that is, you never have enough information to make a good decision, you often can't make it happen when you do, and you may die before you get it done anyway!

Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and other existentialists use the word **Angst, anxiety**, to refer to the apprehension we feel as we move into the uncertainty of our future. It is sometimes translated as **dread** to emphasize the anguish and despair that may come with the need to choose, but anxiety better conveys the generality of it. Anxiety, unlike fear or dread, doesn't have as well-defined an object. It is more a state of being than anything more specific.

Existentialists often talk about **nothingness** in association with anxiety: Because we are not, like tables, angels, and woodchucks, nicely determined, it sometimes feels as if we are about to slip off into nothingness. We would like to be rocks -- solid, simple, eternal -- but we find we are whirlwinds. Anxiety is not some temporary inconvenience to be removed by your friendly therapist; it is a part of being human.

Guilt

So, existentialism is not an "easy" philosophy. It provides a lot fewer ways of avoiding responsibility for one's acts. You can't blame it all on your environment, or your genetics, or your parents, or some psychiatric disease, or booze or drugs, or peer-pressure, or the devil.

Heidegger used the German word **Schuld** to refer to our responsibility to ourselves. Schuld means both **guilt** and **debt**. If we do not do what we know we should, we feel guilt. We have incurred a debt to Dasein. And since Dasein is always in the process of development, never quite finished, we are always dealing with incompleteness, in the same sense that we are always confronted by uncertainty.

Another word that fits in well here is **regret**. Guilt is certainly a matter of regret over the things we have done -- or left undone -- that have harmed others. But we also feel regret over past decisions that don't harm anyone but ourselves. When we have chosen the easy way out, or chosen not to commit ourselves or not to get involved, or have chosen to do less rather than more, when we have lost our nerve, we feel regret.

Death

Existentialists are sometimes criticized for being preoccupied with death. They do, in fact, discuss it in greater depth than do most theorists, but it is hardly a morbid interest. It is in facing death that we are most likely to come to an understanding of life. Sartre says, in his play **The Flies**, "life begins on the far side of despair."

Heidegger called us **being-towards-death**. We are, it appears, the only creature that is aware of its own end. When we become aware of our mortality, we may at first shrink from it and try to forget its reality by getting "busy" in the day-to-day activities of the social world. But this will not do. Avoiding death is avoiding life.

I once found myself holding one of my infant daughters while at the same time thinking about death -- a strange thing perhaps, but thinking about these things is my life's work! When I glanced down at her sleeping face, I thought about how soon she and I would die. At that moment, I was overwhelmed by my love for her. It is the very fact that she and I have only a very short time together that makes love more than just a familial arrangement. When you fully realize that you are going to die, every moment you waste is wasted forever.

Authenticity

Unlike most other personality theorists, the existentialists make no effort to avoid value judgments. Phenomenologically, good and bad are as "real" as solid waste and burnt toast. So they are quite clear that there are better and worse ways of living life. The better ways they call **authentic**.

To live authentically means to be aware of yourself, of your circumstances (thrownness), of your social world (fallenness), of your duty to create yourself (understanding), of the inevitability of anxiety, of guilt, and of death. It means further to accept these things in an act of self-affirmation. It means involvement, compassion, and commitment.

Notice that the ideal of mental health is not pleasure or even happiness, although existentialists have nothing particularly against those things. The goal is to do your best.

Inauthenticity

Someone who is living inauthentically is no longer "becoming" but only "being." They have traded openness for closedness, the dynamic for the static, possibilities for actualities. If authenticity is movement, they have stopped.

Existentialists avoid classifications. Each person is unique. First, we begin with different "raw materials" -- genetics, cultures, families, and so on. Then we take those beginnings and create ourselves through the choices we make. And so there are as many ways to be authentic as there are people, and just as many ways to be inauthentic.

Conventionality is the most common style of inauthenticity. It involves ignoring one's freedom and living a life of conformity and shallow materialism. If you can manage to be like everyone else, you need not make choices. You can turn to authority, or to your peers, or to the media for "guidance." You can become too "busy" to notice the moral decisions you need to make. You are fallen and living in what Sartre called **bad faith**.

Another style of inauthenticity is **existential neurosis**. In some ways, the neurotic is a little more aware than the conventional person: They know they are faced with choices, and it scares the daylights out of them. It scares them so much, in fact, that they are overwhelmed. They freeze or panic, or change their existential anxiety and guilt into neurotic anxiety and guilt: Find something "small" -- a phobic object, an obsession or compulsion, a target for anger, a disease or the pretense of a disease -- to make life's difficulties more objective. An existential psychologist would say that, although you may get rid of the symptoms with any number of techniques, ultimately you need to face the reality of Dasein.

Binswanger sees inauthenticity as a matter of choosing a single **theme** for one's life, or a small number of themes, and allowing the rest of Dasein to be dominated by that one theme. A person Freudians might call "anal retentive," for example, might be one dominated by a theme of hoarding, or holding in, or tightness, or perfection. Someone who doesn't seem in control of his or her life may be dominated by a theme of luck, or fate, or waiting. A person who anxiously over-eats may be dominated by a theme of emptiness, hollowness, and the need to fill oneself. A "workaholic" may be dominated by a theme involving wasted time or being overtaken.

Existential analysis

Diagnosis

Binswanger and other existential psychologists make a point of discovering their client's **world view** (or **world design**). This is not a matter of discussing a person's religion or philosophy of life, necessarily. Binswanger wants to know about your Lebenswelt, Husserl's word for "lived world." He is looking for a concrete, everyday world view.

He will, for example, try to understand how you see your **Umwelt** or physical world -- things, buildings, trees, furniture, gravity...

He will want to understand your **Mitwelt**, or social world, as well. Here we are talking about your relations to individuals, to community, to culture, and so on.

And he will want to understand your **Eigenwelt** or personal world. This includes both mind and body, whatever you feel is most central to your sense of who you are.

Binswanger is equally interested in your relationship to **time**. He would like to know how you view your past, present, and future. Do you live in the past, forever trying to recapture those golden days? Or do you live in the future, always preparing or hoping for a better life? Do you see your life as a long, complex adventure? Or a brief flash -- here today, gone tomorrow?

Also of interest is the way you treat **space**. Is your world open, or is it closed? Is it cozy or is it vast? Is it warm or cold? Do you see life as movement, as a matter of journeys and adventures, or do you see it from an immovable center? None of these things mean anything all by themselves, of course, but combined with everything else, learned in the intimate relationship of therapy, they can mean a great deal.

Binswanger also talks about different **modes**: Some people live in a **singular mode**, alone and self-sufficient. Others live in a **dual mode**, as a "you and me" rather than an "I." Some live in a **plural mode**, thinking of themselves in terms of their membership in something larger than themselves -- a nation, a religion, an organization, a culture. Still others live in an **anonymous mode**, quiet, secretive, in the background of life. And most of us live in all these modes from time to time and place to place.

As you can see, the language of existential analysis is **metaphor**. Life is much too big, much too rich, to be captured by anything so crude as prose. My life is certainly too rich to be captured in words that you thought up before you even met me! Existential therapists allow their clients to reveal themselves, disclose themselves, in their own words, in their own time.

Existentialists may be interested in your dreams, for example. But instead of telling you what your dreams mean, they will ask you. They might suggest that you let your dreams inspire you, let them guide you, let them suggest their own meanings. They may mean nothing, and they may mean everything.

Therapy

The essence of existential therapy is the relationship between the therapist and the client, called an **encounter**. An encounter is the genuine presence of one Dasein to another, an "opening up" of one to the other. Unlike more "formal" therapies, such as Freud's, or more "technical" ones, such as the behaviorists', an existential therapist is likely to be involved with you. Transference and countertransference are seen as natural parts of the encounter, not to be abused, of course, but not to be avoided either.

On the other hand, humanists might find the existential therapist more formal than they, and more directive. The existential therapist is more likely to be "natural" with you -- often quietly listening, but sometimes expressing their own thoughts, experiences, even emotions. "Being natural" also means acknowledging the differences between you. The therapist has the training and the experience, after all, and it is the client (presumably) who has the problems! Existential therapy is seen as a dialog, and not a monologue by the therapist, nor a monologue by the client.

But existential analysis has as its goal the **autonomy** of the client. Like teaching children to ride a bicycle, you may have to hold them up for a while, but eventually you have to let them go. They may well fall down, but if you never let them go, they will never learn to ride! If the "essence" of Dasein -- being human -- is freedom and responsibility for one's own life, then you can't help people become more fully human unless you are prepared to release them.

Discussion

The most positive thing about existential psychology is its insistence on sticking as closely as possible to **"the lived world."** In phenomenology, we have come a long way towards a rigorous method for describing life as it is lived. Theory, statistics, reductionism, and experiments are put aside, at least for the moment. First, say the existentialists, we need to know what we are talking about!

This makes existential psychology naturally applied: It moved effortlessly into the realms of diagnosis and psychotherapy; it is showing its face in the realm of education; and it may well someday move into industrial and organizational psychology.

It has had much less success gaining respect as a research method. There are two psychology journals that showcase phenomenological research, and a few journals in education and nursing are open to it. But most of psychology rejects it, and rather strongly. It is simply considered unscientific. Since it involves neither hypotheses nor statistics, much less independent or independent variables, or control groups or random sampling, it isn't even acceptable, at most universities, for masters or doctoral theses.

Difficulties

The difficulties existentialism has had gaining respect is not entirely the fault of traditional psychology, however. It sometimes seems that existentialists glory in being unacceptable to, or at least misunderstood by, mainstream English-speaking psychologists.

While it is true that new ideas are hard to express and require new words and new ways of using old ones, many of existential psychology's terms are unnecessarily obscure. Many are drawn from philosophical traditions, familiar, perhaps, to philosophers, but not to many psychologists. Others are in German or French, or are poorly translated. Some seem just plain whimsical, or pretentious.

What is needed is a truly talented English-speaking existentialist writer. After all, the language of the ordinary experiences of ordinary people should be ordinary language! Rollo May and Viktor Frankl have made some significant efforts in that direction, but there is much more to be done.

Existentialists also tend to be rather picky, even fighting among themselves about whether one or the other has the "true" understanding of Husserl or Heidegger or whomever. They can gain a great deal, especially in making their approach acceptable to the mainstream of psychology, by paying attention to Alfred Adler, Erich Fromm, Carl Rogers and other theorists, researchers, and practitioners who may not be exactly existentialists, but often express themselves a lot better.

The biggest danger I feel existentialists create for themselves is in their tendency to place themselves in opposition to the mainstream. It is true that psychology has two broad "cultures," the hard-core experimentalists on the one hand, and the more humanistically inclined clinicians and other applied psychologists on the other. By denigrating the experimental culture, they antagonize half of psychology!

If I seem a bit hard on the existential psychologists, it is in part because I am one. It's a little like patriotism: The more you love your country, the more you are likely to worry over its faults. Nevertheless, I feel that existential psychology has a great deal to offer. In particular, it offers a solid philosophical base where Adlerians and Rogerians and neoFreudians and others besides existentialists might gather to further develop and refine their understanding of human life.

Readings

Binswanger's work was first presented to the English-speaking world as three contributions to **Existence**, a volume of papers edited by May, Angel, and Ellenberger. Additional papers have been collected in **Being-in-the-World**. Much of his work remains untranslated, especially *Grundformen und Erkenntnis menschlichen Daseins* (**The Foundations and Cognition of Human Existence**). To see my translation of the table of contents, [click here!](#)

If you wish to find out more about existential psychology and philosophy in general, you might want to read the textbook **Existential-Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology**, edited by Valle and King, or the classic introduction, **Irrational Man**, by William Barrett.

If you are brave indeed, you might want to try some of the original greats in phenomenology and existentialism, such as Edmund Husserl or Martin Heidegger. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are fascinating, as is Jean-Paul Sartre, who offers a somewhat different version of existentialism from Heidegger's.

If you need something a little more accessible, try Keen's **A Primer in Phenomenological Psychology**, Steiner's classic **Martin Heidegger**, McCall's **Phenomenological Psychology** (which has a very helpful section on Heidegger's terminology), and Stewart and Mickunas' **Exploring Phenomenology**. For a history of existential psychology and psychiatry, read Spiegelberg's classic, **Phenomenology in Psychology and Psychiatry**. This last book will also lead you to other existential and phenomenological psychologists.

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