Authenticity and Our Basic Existential Dilemmas

Foundational Concepts of Existential Psychology and Therapy

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Abstract

The core element of existential psychology is its theory of the existentials or the basic existential dilemmas. Existential therapy is helping the client to find his or her own feet in relation to these existential dilemmas. The article enumerates the basic existential dilemmas and sketches their relation to the phenomenon of authenticity. The significance of dealing with authenticity is then discussed in relation to existential therapy.

Keywords

Existential dilemma, authenticity, existential psychology, life regret, existential guilt

What is existential psychology?

Existential psychology is the branch of psychology that deals with each human being’s relationship to the most essential life dilemmas, the so-called big questions of life. Existential psychology also aims to capture the spirit and feeling of life itself rather than subsuming life under a system of logical and systematic categories. Furthermore, existential psychology aims to include basic philosophical reflections in our psychological understanding, at the same time constituting a basic frame of reference for existential therapy, counselling and coaching.

The basic dilemmas of being human

Some animals seem to live an easy life. A dog or a cat, for example, may spend its whole life eating, sleeping, wandering about, looking, listening, mating and resting. The life of an animal is a life without problems (although life for some animals is periodically unpleasant). It is a life without reflections on life.

Human beings are compelled to live a life in which they reflect upon their own life. All human beings experience moments when they have to choose between alternate courses of action. We all have thoughts about when we are going to die, or how we can achieve a valuable goal. We also
think about falling ill, getting older, being alone, having enemies and loved ones and about many other aspects of our lives.

As human beings, we are all doomed to reflect upon our lives, but at the same time this requirement is our great chance and opportunity to develop ourselves and our lives towards higher states that definitely distinguish us from the animals.

According to existential theory, the life reflections we all make are not just accidental and arbitrary. Although every individual entertains private thoughts about his or her own life, such thoughts are, however, broadly characterised only by a limited number of themes.

Our thoughts on living all derive from the same source: the life structure into which we are born. Our daily lives are to a great extent formed by our interplay with a finite number of basic life conditions (or existentials) that constitute the basic elements of our existence.

As human beings, our options are such that we can either close our eyes to these basic conditions and live falsely or blindly in some kind of make-believe life, or we can choose to look these existentials squarely in the eye and learn how to relate to them constructively, thus living more openly and freely, in a more grounded and real way. Existential psychologists use the word *authenticity* to designate this genuine life that is a possibility open to everyone.

*The structure of existence.* There are different catalogues and lists surveying these basic life conditions. The most well-known is Irvin Yalom's enumeration of four basic existential conditions: that we are going to die, that in decisive moments we are alone, that we have the freedom to choose our life, and that we struggle to create meaning in a world in which our life meaning is not given in advance (Yalom 1980). According to Yalom, these four basic conditions constitute a structure that is our premise, something that all human beings are born into. The four conditions set the frame and the agenda for the life of each individual. Many people would rather avoid thinking about, talking about and relating to these basic conditions, including death, but this fact does not weaken their impact, rather the opposite.

Yalom assigns about the same status to these basic conditions as did Freud in his era to sexuality: a drive that permeates almost everything and to which most people close their eyes, causing the drive to make itself felt in a distorted form.

Another familiar theory about life’s basic conditions, developed by Medard Boss, lists seven fundamental traits of human life: (1) human beings live in space; (2) human beings live in time; (3) human beings unfold through their body; (4) human beings live in a shared world; (5) human beings always live in a particular mood, a psychological
atmosphere; (6) human beings live in a historic context; and (7) human beings live with the awareness of their own death (Boss 1994: chap.7).

These seven basic conditions may be called existentials, core factors in everybody's life. If we look at (2), it is true for all of us that as we live, time goes by. We all have a past, a present and a future; we all live at a specific intersection of the individual time axis that stipulates the beginning and end of each individual lifespan. We all have things that we choose to spend time doing and other things that we do not. It is true for all of us that we cannot use the same time twice, and that the moment when this sentence is read will never come back; a moment can be lived only once. All these time dimensions in our life are active and influence us whether we want to think about them or not; evidence also suggests that we can live more freely and in a more enlightened way if we indeed choose to think about them.

Other existential authors have developed similar lists and overviews of humankind’s basic life conditions (Condrau 1989; Moustakas 1994). As early as half a century ago, however, one particularly interesting exposition was formulated by Erich Fromm, the German-American humanistic psychoanalyst and writer: "All passions and strivings of man," he writes, "are attempts to find an answer to his existence" (Fromm 1956: 27ff). Fromm then goes on to mention as basic points the individual’s fundamental need for love (relatedness), for transcending himself, for developing rootedness and a feeling of being at home, for finding his or her identity and for finding his or her orientation and meaning in life. According to Fromm, the most specific characteristics of any human being derive from the fact that our bodily functions belong to the animal kingdom, whereas our mental and social life belong to a human, conscious world that is aware of itself (Fromm 1956: 22ff). Therefore, the satisfaction of our instinctual needs is not sufficient to make us happy. We constantly strive towards discovering new solutions to the rampant contradictions of our existence, towards finding ever higher forms of unity with nature with our fellow human beings and with ourselves. The fact that even the most prosperous of the world’s nations display such massive levels of alcoholism, crime, suicides, drug abuse and boredom testify to this.

The basic life conditions seen as life dilemmas. The basic categories of life conditions proposed by Irvin Yalom, Medard Boss, Erich Fromm and related scholars share many traits. The differences between them are not contradictory in nature, but rather supplementary.

The basic conditions are sometimes seen as relatively straightforward categories or realities, but each may also be viewed as a dilemma representing two opposite poles between which our life is torn and between which it must balance. I favour the latter view, seeing the basic conditions
as *dilemmas*, because this view accentuates the choices we always face as human beings. Existential theorists subscribing to this view would suggest that there are a number of given *ontological facts* (e.g. one day we will die), but that these facts present themselves to us in the form of *life dilemmas*.

In everyday language, we understand a dilemma as a situation in which we are faced with a difficult choice between two alternatives, A and B. You cannot have both at the same time.

By a *life dilemma* we understand a situation in which the choice stands between two poles that both fall within what we normally expect out of life. Both belong to what you perceive of as a reasonable or happy life. But you cannot see how you can reconcile them or integrate them. For some people “to be oneself” and “to be with others” is such a dilemma. The life question you might raise in such a situation is this: How can I find and define myself (something that I usually do on my own) and at the same time bond intimately with friends and loved ones? Existential psychology deals with that type of question.

We are all to a greater or lesser extent torn between such opposites. How to navigate your way through such dilemmas along a constructive path is what life is all about. And it is what existential psychology is all about.

To the extent that you succeed in finding your own two feet in relation to the big life questions, to that extent, the existential psychologists would say, do you live an authentic life.

**What is it to live authentically?**

As a human being you are confronted with an important choice concerning your own life. Either you can say, I’ll just do like everyone else, I’ll do what others expect me to do; I’ll try to *be* like the others. Or you can say, I believe there are some choices that are more important and more right or true for me than certain other choices. I would like to find out which would be the important and right things for me to do and I would like to live accordingly.

In existential psychology, the latter choice is called *to live authentically*. Authentic means genuine or known to be true; to live authentically means to live truthfully, i.e. in accordance with one’s deep convictions, beliefs, values and goals. Some writers would add, and in accordance with yourself and your bodily nature and temperament. To live authentically also means to find your own two feet in relation to the basic life dilemmas mentioned above.

The way the existential philosopher and theologian John Macquarrie defines authenticity, life is authentic to the extent that an individual has taken possession of the self and moulded that self into his or her own image. Inauthentic existence is moulded by external factors, whether they
be circumstances, moral codes, political and religious authorities, or other influences (Macquarrie 1972:206)

The existential definition of authentic living, says Macquarrie, has more to do with form than with content. It is the shape of the existence that counts, the degree to which it has achieved unity, the way it exercises freedom and self-determination, rather than being fragmented, scattered or determined by the prevailing tastes and standards (Macquarrie 1972:207). This does not imply that a person cannot independently choose to live according to the prevailing tastes and standards.

The moral philosopher Mary Warnock sees authenticity as each human being’s ability to fulfil his or her own potential and possibilities. To live authentically is to recognise that each human being is unique and to accept the personal consequence that, this being so, one has to find one’s very own determination and realise one’s own potential (Warnock 1970).

The concept of authenticity has various meanings. The existential therapist Hans Cohn encourages us not to see the concept as a goal that can be achieved. All people are inauthentic at certain times; that is part of life (Cohn 1993, 4: 48-56). In a similar vein, Martin Heidegger writes that the fact that existence is inauthentic does not mean that it entails less being or a lower level of being. At the same time, authenticity is of course something that is deeply desirable (Heidegger 2000).

Many people can live in a slightly superficial way for years. They are busy, buzz from one activity to the next, play the parts that are required of them, watch TV; forgetting the meaning of it all. They mechanically perform in the roles and display the attitudes that the others, the ‘they’ (das Man) think that you should.

Then at a certain point, some people may experience a sudden awakening, as if dramatically summoned to life. Heidegger talks about the call of conscience. When using this term, he does not mean the public conscience, the overall moral codes, but the conscience that comes from the depths of oneself. It is a call from the authentic part of oneself struggling to emerge, to come to life. According to Heidegger, the voice calls upon the person to take responsibility for his or her own life (Heidegger 2000, p. 318ff).

How can one best take one’s own life seriously without being too burdened by it at the same time? One possibility can be termed resoluteness (Deurzen-Smith 1995, 2: 13-25). Resolute action is characterised by decisiveness, firmness and determination. Yes means yes, and no means no. Often developed following difficult life experiences, resoluteness means clarity. The person knows what he or she wants. It is related to the person’s ability to stay focused and concentrated.
A woman in her late fifties has been through a crisis. Today she is alive, active and loving when she is with her family. Sometimes, she says, “you simply love life.”

17 years ago her mother died suddenly and without warning. The woman cannot forgive herself that her mother died without their having had the opportunity to talk. “It has influenced me in the sense that you shouldn’t postpone anything. If you have something you want to finish, then you should finish it. Because there are no guarantees that you’ll be here tomorrow … If there is something that I want to say to someone, I say it now … I never got to tell her that I love her more than anything in the world …”

To live with resoluteness or determination presupposes a certain clarity of mind as to what you are here for, what counts for you, what you stand for and what you are against. Such clarity is generally acquired by living through a certain number of difficult life situations. A few people seem to be born with this gift of clarity concerning their own lives. But all the rest of us have to acquire this clarity of life the hard way. Afterwards, however, we find life incomparably more valuable. For some reason, almost all of us are under the impression that other people have easier access to their accomplishments and results than we do ourselves. But this is usually a false impression.

Once you have acquired a minimum degree of clarity about what you are living for, the questions of authenticity and how to take your own life seriously do not appear to be “heavy” questions. These questions need not weigh you down. It is possible to be authentic and spontaneous at the same time. One of the fathers of existential therapy, Medard Boss, conceives of the authentic life as a life marked by playfulness and humour. His concept of the ideal state of mind, *composed, joyous serenity*, entails ease and heaviness hand in hand. Playfulness and seriousness embrace one another, as do our knowledge of death and our commitment to life.

*Life regrets and authenticity.* Most people seem to ask themselves quite often: How should my future be? Should I aim at this or that?

In the same way, most people reflect upon their past. Some ruminate. Others discuss with their friends or their partners: Did I do the right things? Did I use my time and meet my challenges in the best possible way?

In an interview study, we put this question to a number of respondents:

| If you could live your life again, would you change anything or would you live it in the same way? |

Here are some answers:

“I would probably have liked to take more part in life … instead of sitting back like that … and not really dare to join in … I have sort of
felt that it wasn’t really my place to make demands on life …” (Secretary, 38, woman).

A woman worked 10 years in her husband’s company and didn't like the administrative work in itself or working for her husband. “It was probably the most stupid thing we ever did in our life together … I stayed out of a sense of convenience, right? And I can see that today, of course … that it was the most stupid thing …” (Woman, 47, former administrative officer).

“I would probably have lived … the life surrounded by nature that perhaps I wanted deep inside. Instead I flowed with the stream by haphazardly starting an education … And clearly, if I were to live a new life, I would much rather have stayed married to only one man … I think I regret that I married Frank. That is probably what I regret most of all … I have had to compromise too much …”

This woman states that were she to live her life again, she would not marry Frank. Despite many good moments she feels that it was the wrong choice. But with two children, she was between a rock and a hard place, and then Frank was there, generous and with flowers. (Woman, 44, project manager).

As it appears, all three persons have had regrets, either occasioned by specific actions or a particular attitude or lifestyle.

Regrets of this type are rather common, but perhaps it takes a certain amount of courage to look them in the eye. There are several ways of dealing with such regrets. Some see them as a fate they cannot change. Others see the dissatisfactions as something they can learn from, partly by correcting things for the remainder of their lives, partly by passing their lesson on to the next generation.

But not everyone is burdened by discontents:

“By and large, I would live my life in the same way. I do, however, feel bad about the people that I have somehow let down. I also regret that I didn’t get enough out of my university studies, because I had too many other things going on in my life.” (Woman, 27, student).

“I would like to live my life again, on exactly the same terms. And that doesn’t mean to say that my life has been the easiest of lives, because it certainly hasn’t. I haven’t been spared anything … But if you take life as a whole, I would be prepared to take the good things with the bad one more time …” (Woman, 63, administrative executive).

“Well, no, I don’t really think I would change anything. I think that I have lived a pretty good life; you know, nice and quiet … I have worked in the same place of employment for 43 years and so on and
so forth; that seems very much to indicate that my whole life has been satisfactory …” (Man, 71, former mason, retired).

These people do not have any regrets gnawing away at their souls. Have they been on the right track all along and been able to stick to the most important aspects? Or have they been able to live with and accept the deficiencies and ailments that crop up in most lives, so that they could take possession of their lives?

**Existential guilt and authenticity.** In existential psychology, life regrets are seen as connected with a specific theory about guilt, the theory of existential guilt. In other schools of psychology and therapy, e.g. psychoanalysis or cognitive therapy, guilt is mainly seen as a pathological phenomenon and as a symptom that should be treated in some way. Irvin Yalom lists three types of guilt: real guilt, neurotic guilt and existential guilt (Yalom 1980: 276). Real guilt arises if you have damaged another person in real life. Neurotic guilt is if you have done so only in your imagination. Existential guilt is a positive element in people’s life, as underlined by Rollo May as well (May 1983: 114-16). It points out the areas in which you have not as yet lived up to the possibility that were given to you (including possibilities to treat others and nature with care and respect). Therefore, although it may be painful, existential guilt is a chance to redirect the rest of your life and to reach some sort of reconciliation with that which cannot be changed.

As we have seen, authenticity is a concept that is somewhat difficult to define. The definition must be sufficiently open to embrace the fact that the term is infused with meaning by every living person in his or her unique way. But despite the difficulties of definition, the concept of authenticity can be seen as one of the most fruitful and promising in the realm of psychology, paving the way from the discipline of psychology to “the good life”. This term allows practitioners of psychological knowledge and psychological theories to demonstrate how psychology is not just for diagnosing maladaptations and psychological illnesses. Psychology – especially existential psychology – also has to show people how it is possible to develop a more truthful life, to achieve a more vibrant sense of living, to attach a more personal meaning to the concept of happiness and to experience love and to acknowledge what is good and bad in your life.

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His article here is further developed in his book *"Invitation to Existential Psychology. A Psychology for the Unique Human Being and its Applications in Therapy”* that will be published by Wiley later this year.
References


