

What Psychology Can Learn From The Existentialists

Abraham Maslow

Published at the time of his presidency of the American Psychological Association, and just two years before his untimely death, this essay reflects Abraham Maslow's final sentiments on existentialism. Not only does existentialism have revolutionary implications for psychology's "third [humanistic] branch," Maslow concludes, but it also harbors such implications for the field as a whole. "The existentialists teach that both [creatureliness and godlikeness] are... defining characteristics of human nature....And any philosophy which leaves out either cannot be considered to be comprehensive."

If we study existentialism from the point of view of "What's in it for the psychologist?" we find much that is too vague and too difficult to understand from a scientific point of view (not confirmable or disconfirmable). But we also find a great deal that is of profit. From such a point of view, we find it to be not so much a totally new revelation, as a stressing, confirming, sharpening and rediscovering of trends already existing in "Third Force psychology."

To me existential psychology means essentially two main emphases. First, it is a radical stress on the concept of identity and the experience of identity as the *sine qua non* of human nature and of any philosophy or science of human nature. I choose this concept as *the* basic one partly because I understand it better than terms like essence, existence, ontology, and so on, and partly because I feel also that it can be worked with empirically, if not now, then soon.

But then a paradox results, for the American psychologists have *also* been impressed with the quest for identity. (Allport, Rogers, Goldstein, Fromm, Wheelis, Erikson, Murray, Murphy, Horney, May, et al). And I must say that these writers are a lot clearer and a lot closer to raw fact; i.e., more empirical than are, e.g., the Germans, Heidegger, Jaspers.

Secondly, it lays great stress on starting from experiential knowledge rather than from systems of concepts or abstract categories or a priori. Existentialism rests on phenomenology, i.e., it uses personal, subjective experience as the foundation upon which abstract knowledge is built.

But many psychologists also have started with this same stress, not to mention all the various brands of psychoanalysts.

1. Conclusion number 1 is, then, that European philosophers and American psychologists are not so far apart as appears at first. We Americans have been "talking prose all the time and don't know it." Partly of course this simultaneous development in different countries is itself an indication that people who have independently been coming to the same conclusions are all responding to something real outside themselves.
2. This something real I believe is the total collapse of all sources of values outside the individual. Many European existentialists are largely reacting to Nietzsche's conclusion that God is dead, and perhaps to the fact that Marx is also dead. The Americans have learned that political democracy and economic prosperity don't in themselves solve any of the basic value problems. There's no place else to turn but inward, to the self, as the locus of values. Paradoxically, even some of the religious existentialists will go along with this conclusion part of the way.
3. It is extremely important for psychologists that the existentialists may supply psychology with the underlying philosophy which it now lacks. Logical positivism has been a failure, especially for clinical and personality psychologists. At any rate, the basic philosophical problems will surely be opened up for discussion again and perhaps psychologists will

stop relying on pseudo-solutions or on unconscious, unexamined philosophies they picked up as children.

4. An alternative phrasing of the core (for us Americans) of European existentialism is that it deals radically with that human predicament presented by the gap between human aspirations and human limitations (between what the human being is, and what he would *like* to be, and what he *could* be). This is no so far off from the identity problem as it might sound at first. A person is both actuality *and* potentiality.

That serious concern with this discrepancy could revolutionize psychology, there is no doubt in my mind. Various literatures already support such a conclusion, e.g., projective testing, self-actualization, the various peak-experiences (in which this gap is bridged), the Jungian psychologies, various theological thinkers, etc.

Not only this, but they raise also the problems and techniques of integration of this twofold nature of man, his lower and his higher, his creatureliness and his godlikeness. On the whole, most philosophies and religions, Eastern as well as Western, have dichotomized them, teaching that the way to become “higher” is to renounce and master “the lower.” The existentialists, however, teach that *both* are simultaneously defining characteristics of human nature. Neither can be repudiated; they can only be integrated.

But we already know something of these integration techniques—of insight, of intellect in the broader sense, of love, of creativeness, of humor and tragedy, of play, of art. I suspect we will focus our studies on these integrative techniques more than we have in the past.

Another consequence for my thinking of this stress on the twofold nature of man is the realization that some problems must remain eternally insoluble.

5. From this flows naturally a concern with the ideal, authentic, or perfect or god-like human being, a study of human potentialities as *now* existing in a certain sense, as *current* knowable reality. This, too, may sound merely literary but it's not. I remind you that this is just a fancy way of asking the old, unanswered questions, “What are the goals of therapy, of education, of bringing up children?”

It also implies another truth and another problem which calls urgently for attention. Practically every serious description of the “authentic person” extant implies that such a person, by virtue of what he has become, assumes a new relation to his society and indeed, to society in general. He not only transcends himself in various ways; he also transcends his culture. He resists enculturation. He becomes more detached from his culture and from his society. He becomes a little more a member of his species and a little less a member of his local group. My feeling is that most sociologists and anthropologists will take this hard. I therefore confidently expect controversy in this area. But this is clearly a basis for “universalism.”

6. From the European writers, we can and should pick up their greater emphasis on what they call “philosophical anthropology,” that is, the attempt to define man, and the differences between man and any other species, between man and objects, and between man and robots. What are his unique and defining characteristics? What is so essential to man that without it he would no longer be defined as a man?

On the whole this is a task from which American psychology has abdicated. The various behaviorisms don't generate any such definition, at least none that can be taken seriously (what *would* an S-R man be like? And who would like to be one?) Freud's picture of man was clearly unsuitable, leaving out as it did his aspirations, his realizable hopes, his godlike qualities. The fact that Freud supplied us with most of our comprehensive systems of psychopathology and psychotherapy is beside the point as the contemporary ego-psychologists are finding out.

7. Some existential philosophers are stressing the self-making of the self too exclusively. Sartre and others speak of the "self as a project." Which is wholly created by the continued (and arbitrary) choices of the person himself, almost as if he could make himself into anything he decided to be. Of course in so extreme a form, this is almost certainly an overstatement, which is directly contradicted by the facts of genetics and of constitutional psychology. As a matter of fact, it is just plain silly.

On the other hand, the Freudians, the existential therapists, the Rogerians and the personal growth psychologists all talk more about *discovering* the self and of *uncovering* therapy, and have perhaps understressed the factors of will, of decision, and of the ways in which we do make ourselves by our choices.

(Of course, we must not forget that both of these groups can be said to be over-psychologizing and under-sociologizing. That is, they do not stress sufficiently in their systematic thinking the great power of autonomous social and environmental determinants, of such forces outside the individual as poverty, exploitation, nationalism, war and social structure. Certainly no psychologist in his right mind would dream of *denying* a degree of personal helplessness before these forces. But after all, his prime professional obligation is the study of the individual person rather than of extra-psychic social determinants. In the same way, sociologists seem to the psychologist to stress social forces too exclusively and to forget about the autonomy of the personality, of will, of responsibility, etc. It would be better to think of both groups as specialists rather than as blind or foolish.)

In any case it looks as if we *both* discover and uncover ourselves and also decide on what we shall be. This clash of opinion is a problem that can be settled empirically.

8. Not only have we been ducking the problem of responsibility and of will, but also their corollaries of strength and courage. Recently the psychoanalytic ego psychologists have waked up to this great human variable and have been devoting a great deal of attention to "ego strength." For the behaviorists, this is still an untouched problem.
9. American psychologists have listened to Allport's call for an ideographic psychology but haven't done much about it. Not even the clinical psychologists have. We now have an added push from the phenomenologists and existentialists in this direction, one that will be very hard to resist, indeed I think, theoretically *impossible* to resist. If the study of the uniqueness of the individual does not fit into what we know of science, then so much the worse for that conception of science. It, too, will have to endure re-creation.
10. Phenomenology has a history in American psychological thinking, but on the whole I think it has languished. The European phenomenologists with their excruciatingly careful and laborious demonstrations, can reteach us that the best way of understanding another human being, or at least *a* way necessary for some purposes, is

to get into *his* Weltanschauung and to be able to see *his* world through *his* eyes. Of course such a conclusion is rough on any positivistic philosophy of science.

11. The existentialist stress on the ultimate aloneness of the individual is a useful reminder for us, not only to work out further the concepts of decision, or responsibility, of choice, of self-creation, of autonomy, of identity itself. It also makes more problematic and more fascinating the mystery of communication between alone-ness via, e.g., intuition and empathy, love and altruism, identification with others, and harmony in general. We take these for granted. It would be better if we regarded them as miracles to be explained.
12. Another preoccupation of existentialist writers can be phrased very simply, I think. It is the dimension of seriousness and profundity of living (or perhaps the “tragic sense of life”) contrasted with the shallow and superficial life, which is a kind of diminished living, a defense against the ultimate problems of life. This is not just a literary concept. It has real operational meaning, for instance, in psychotherapy. I (and others) have been increasingly impressed with the fact that tragedy can sometimes be therapeutic, and that therapy often seems to work best when people are *driven* into it by pain. It is when the shallow life doesn’t work that it is questioned and that there occurs a call to fundamentals. Shallowness in psychology doesn’t work either as the existentialists are demonstrating very clearly.
13. The existentialists along with many other groups are helping to teach us about the limits of verbal, analytic, conceptual rationality. They are part of the current call back to raw experience as prior to any concepts or abstractions. This amounts to what I believe to be a justified critique of the whole way of thinking of the western world in the 20th century, including orthodox positivistic science and philosophy, both of which badly need re-examination.
14. Possibly most important of all the changes to be wrought by the phenomenologists and existentialists is an overdue revolution in the theory of science. I shouldn’t say “wrought by” but rather “helped along by,” because there are many other forces helping to destroy official philosophy of science or “scientism.” It is not only the Cartesian split between subject and object that needs to be overcome. There are other radical changes made necessary by the inclusion of the psyche and of raw experience in reality, and such a change will affect not only the science of psychology but all other sciences as well, e.g., parsimony, simplicity, precision, orderliness, logic, elegance, definition, etc. are all of the realm of abstraction rather than of experience.
15. I close with the stimulus that has most powerfully affected me in the existentialist literature, namely, the problem of future time in psychology. Not that this, like all the other problems or pushes I have mentioned up to this point, was totally unfamiliar to me nor, I imagine, to *any* serious student of theory of personality. The writings of Charlotte Buhler, Gordon Allport, and Kurt Goldstein should also have sensitized us to the necessity of grappling with and systematizing the dynamic role of the future in the presently existing personality, e.g., growth and becoming and possibility necessarily point toward the future; so do the concepts of potentiality and hoping, and of wishing and imagining; reduction to the concrete is a loss of future; threat and apprehension

point to the future (no future = no neurosis); self-actualization is meaningless without reference to a currently active future; life can be a gestalt in time, etc., etc.

And yet the *basic* and *central* importance of this problem for the existentialists has something to teach us, e.g., Erwin Strauss' paper in the May volume.* I think it fair to say that no theory of psychology will ever be complete which does not centrally incorporate the concept that man has his future within him, dynamically active at this present moment. In this sense the future can be treated as a-historical in Kurt Lewin's sense. Also we must realize that *only* the future is *in principle* unknown and unknowable, which means that all habits, defenses and coping mechanisms are doubtful and ambiguous since they are based on past experience. Only the flexibly creative person can really manage future, *only* the one who can face novelty with confidence and without fear. I am convinced that much of what we now call psychology is the study of the tricks we use to avoid the anxiety of absolute novelty by making believe the future will be like the past.

CONCLUSION

These considerations support my hope that we are witnessing an expansion of psychology, not a new "ism" that could turn into an antipsychology or into an antiscience.

It is possible that existentialism will not only enrich psychology. It may also be an additional push towards the establishment of another *branch* of psychology, the psychology of the fully evolved and authentic Self and its way of being. Sutich has suggested calling this ontopsychology.

Certainly it seems more and more clear that what we call "normal" in psychology is really a psychopathology of the average, so undramatic and so widely spread that we don't even notice it ordinarily. The existentialist's study of the authentic person and of authentic living helps to throw this general phoniness, this living by illusions and by fear into a harsh, clear light which reveals it clearly as sickness, even [though] widely shared.

I don't think we need take too seriously the European existentialists' exclusive harping on dread, on anguish, on despair and the like, for which their only remedy seems to be to keep a stiff upper lip. This high I.Q. whimpering on a cosmic scale occurs whenever an external source of values fails to work. They should have learned from the psychotherapists that the loss of illusions and the discovery of identity, though painful at first, can be ultimately exhilarating and strengthening. And then of course the absence of any mention of peak experiences, of experiences of joy and ecstasy, or even of normal happiness, leads to the strong suspicion that these writers are "nonpeakers," people who just don't experience joy. It is as if they could see out of one eye only, and that eye jaundiced. Most people experience *both* tragedy and joy in varying proportions. Any philosophy which leaves out either cannot be considered to be comprehensive.* Colin Wilson distinguishes sharply between Yea-saying existentialists and Nay-saying existentialists. In this distinction, I must agree with him completely.*

*R. May, E. Angel, & H. Ellenberger, *Existence*. (New York: Basic Books, 1958).

*For further writing on this same subject, see my *Eupsychian Management* (Homeward, IL; Irwin-Dorsey, 1965), pp. 194-201.

*Wilson, C. *Introduction to the New Existentialism*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1967).
Source: Adapted from a Laurence Lecture delivered October 20, 1984, at the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, Berkeley, CA.