Does Existential Therapy Sanctify Our Being? (From Philosophy to Counseling Existential Therapy)

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Abstract

The existential approach is a movement of thought that emerged in Europe and America in the first half of the 20th century. The main goal of this approach is to make people think about their own lives, to encourage individuals to make choices in their lives and to take responsibility for their choices. The existential approach is the process of searching for meaning in the life of the individual, and the main task of existential therapists is to encourage the person in the search for meaning. In this study, the historical process of existential therapy, the pioneers of the existential approach, its basic principles and its therapeutic process are discussed.

Keywords: Existential Philosophy; Existential Psychology; Existential Counseling

Introduction

Existentialism has taken place in the literature as the Turkish equivalent of the German concept of Existenz-Philosophie. Exist means essential. The existential approach examines human existence. While the behavioral approach sees man as a product of conditioning, on the other hand, the psychoanalytic approach sees man as the artifact and prisoner of the past. The existential approach opposes these understandings and speaks of human will Bige & Taşçı [1]. According to the doctrine of existentialism, all beings other than humans were created before their existence. Man is the only being that can create his own existence. For example, while the tree does not create itself, man creates his own existence and determines his own path. Man does not exist before life, his existence is formed as he lives, and it is himself who will guide man in his life. Man is free to create his own existence, but with that freedom comes responsibility. Feeling this responsibility is called "existential anxiety". A person knows that one day his life will end. The inevitability of death creates a sense of nothingness. Therefore, the individual worries about whether he or she lives his life in a meaningful way Geçtan [2].

According to the existential approach, human is a creature that can choose among options, make decisions and take responsibility for these decisions Voltan-Acar [3]. According to the existential approach, non-human beings should remain as they were created; Man is the only living thing that can contribute to his own existence and create himself. With his free choices, man can change himself, develop himself and realize his own existence. This feature should also be considered in therapies İlgar & Coşgun İlgar [4]. Frankl (1946/2009) argued that all human experiences have a purpose and meaning, and that this is the main driving force in humans' search for meaning. Thus, he stated that man can find the meaning of existence in three ways.

i. By doing a work or work.

ii. By experiencing something or interacting with a human being.

iii. By developing an attitude towards inevitable pain Bige & Taşçı [1].

According to the existential approach, people who are stuck between life and death have to deal with some existential concerns. Existential therapy deals with the problems that the individual has to deal with. Bakırtaş [5].

According to existential therapy, man and the world he lives in are a whole and the two cannot be considered separately. The world in which man lives consists of three separate areas. These

a)   Umwelt (natural environment).

b)   Mitwelt (human environment).

c)   Eigenwelt (the person himself with his body). In reality, this distinction is one and a person exists in all three worlds Geçtan [2].

Psychotherapist Deurzen (2010) redesigned existential psychotherapy with 4 world categories. These 4 worlds have poles within themselves Yetkin [6].

a)   **Physical world**: In this world, there are concrete features of the person that can be noticed from the outside. Here, the individual's reactions to his physical sensations and his environment are examined. In this world, there are dominance-acceptance, expansion-contraction, life-death poles. Eating disorders and phobias are mostly associated with problems in this world.

b)   **Social world**: In this world, the relationships that the individual establishes with other people are examined. There are poles of introversion-extraversion, belonging-isolation, competition-cooperation, harmony-individuality. Social anxiety, couple relationships, and problems with authority are often associated with problems in this world.

c)   **Personal world**: The relationships that the individual establishes with his personal experiences take place in this world. The self-perception, temperament and abilities of the individual are seen in this section. The poles of this world are as follows: being authentic-non-authentic, self-acceptance-self-development, integrity-dispersion, decision-making-conclusion. Personality disorders and depression are often associated with this episode.

d)   **Spiritual World**: In this world, the beliefs of the individual take place. Poles such as meaning-nonsense, good-bad are located here. One's beliefs and relationship to the unknown are often associated with this place.

Existential psychology has come to the fore with three different schools. The first school is 'existential analysis', which emerged with the writings of Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss. The second is 'logotherapy' developed by Victor Frankl. The third is 'existential phenomenological psychology', largely developed by Rollo May Ilk & Bilici [7]. The emergence of existential psychotherapy was not by any particular person or persons. This therapy emerged spontaneously and simultaneously among different schools of psychology and psychiatry in different parts of Europe in the 1940s and 1950s Corey [8].

Theorists who contributed to the emergence of the existential approach and who are considered the pioneers of this approach are as follows:

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

Kierkegaard, in his work "Critique of Unscientific Inferences",

emphasized that reality can be subjective by opposing German idealism and Hegel's notion of objective truth. In this work, Kierkegaard argued that monolithic philosophies are in the wrong approach to understanding the existence of human beings and that these philosophies prevent humans from assuming the responsibilities of their own existence, in fact, human existence is determined by the decisions and choices made in the face of uncertainties (Gaidenko, 1966: 34; cited in Özen [9].

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

The German thinker Nietzsche emphasized the subjective point of view. He says that in order to improve ourselves, we must reject the morality that society shows us. According to Nietzsche, we need to hold our own reins in order to improve ourselves and reveal our potential. If we do not hold the reins and accept the moral understanding that society shows us, we cannot live like sheep and develop ourselves Corey [8].

He accepted the idea that God is a fiction and that his faith is a being that will surpass himself with his will to power, and he put forward the idea of "superior human" İlgar & Coşgun İlgar [4].

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)

Heidegger's philosophy called ontology; "Man has been thrown into the world. Man is a What has fallen into Nothing. He didn't choose it himself. The word nothing also means Being. I mean human. Being thrown into Being, abandoned Being is unlimited and since it cannot be grasped as it is, it also shows itself as Nothingness. Therefore, it is impossible to define Being with language. Because, according to logic, when it is said that Being is "exist", it cannot be said that "it does not exist" at the same time. Therefore, we can say that language "falls" into Being like human beings (Heidegger, 1955: 126-127) cited., Özen [9].

Heidegger (1926/2004) gave the name "dasein" to the individual's conscious awareness structure that combines his past life and future in the present. The existential approach does not accept the subject-object distinction and states that the individual not only realizes the external reality but also has the capacity to change that reality. Since human has a unique subjective structure, the same technique and method is not used for every individual Bige & Taşçı [1].

Jean-Paul Sarte (1905-1980)

The French philosopher states that freedom and personal responsibility are at the core of existentialism Yıldırım [10]; cited in İlgar & Coşgun İlgar [4].

 "As one of the defenders of empiricism, he questions the principle of causality by joining the views of David Hume and argues that what is seen as necessary is not in the objects but in the mind, and that the mind attributes it to the objects... When there is no necessity-certainty, everything in the world becomes contingent, just like our existence Özen [9].

Martin Buber (1878-1965)

Compared to other existentialists, he placed less emphasis on individuality. According to Buber, the ego's relationship with others or things determines change. Relationships begin to deteriorate when we make big mistakes and begin to see the other person as "things" rather than "they". In his dialogue with Carl Rogers, he emphasized that the roles of the counselor and the client could not be changed because they could not look at the same lens Corey [8].

Ludwing Bingswanger (1881-1966)

Bingswanger and Boss were considered the pioneers of existential psychotherapy by developing a new psychotherapy model called "Daseinanalysis" (Existential Analysis), influenced by the German Philosopher Heidegger's ontology in his work "Being and Time" Özen [9].

Medard Boss (1903-1991)

The concept of life events is explained by the concept of Dasein. It emphasizes that we attach meaning to life events. He said that the task of the therapist is to enter the client's personal world impartially, to recognize the client with experiential understanding and to contribute to his development. He was greatly influenced by Heidegger's views and tried to transfer his philosophical views to his own therapeutic practices Corey [8].

Viktor Frankl (1905-1997)

He is the founder of Logotherapy (therapy through meaning), also called the Third Vienna School of Psychotherapy. "According to logotherapy, the search for a meaning in one's own life is the main motivational force in humans" Frankl [11].

Frankl (1946/2009) argued that there is a meaning and purpose in the lives of the individual and that this search for meaning is the driving force for the individual. An individual can realize this meaning in three ways:

i. By doing a work or a job.

ii. By experiencing something or interacting with a person.

iii. By creating an attitude for the inevitable pain Bige & Taşçı [1].

Rollo May (1909-1994)

He is one of the theorists who brought the existential approach from Europe to the USA. Existence takes courage, according to May, and we determine our identity with our choices. May said that "we continue our struggle between the security and satisfaction of being dependent on the environment, family and society, and the pain of growing up" (Corey, 2005, p.153).

James Bugental

Bugental, one of the important representatives of existential therapy in the USA, stated that "the focus of therapy is to help examine how to answer life's existential questions and to reconsider their answers so that they can start living authentically" (Corey, 2005, p.153).

Irvin Yalom

He emphasized the contributions of European and American psychiatrists and psychologists to existential theory. He contributed to the development of the existential approach by focusing on the concepts of death, freedom, existential isolation and meaninglessness. He was influenced by the views put forward by the following authors Corey [8].

a) From Kierkegaard: Creative anxiety, despair, fear and anxiety, guilt, nothingness.

b) From Neitzsche: Death, suicide and future expectations.

c) From Heidegger: authenticity, support, death, guilt, individual responsibility and isolation. From Sartre: Meaninglessness, responsibility and choice.

d) From Buber: Interpersonal relationships, self and others approach in therapy, personal transformation'

e) Yalom's most important work on this theory is his book "Existential Psychotherapy". It consists of five parts: introduction, death, freedom (responsibility and will), existential isolation and meaninglessness Bakırtaş [5].

Existential Therapy

Existential therapy is based on philosophy rather than psychology. The main purpose of existential therapy is to return to one's own center (agency), to return to authenticity, to be the author of his life and to take responsibility. In this therapy process, the client's experience is tried to be understood within the phenomenological approach without using any technique or formulation Göktürk Duru [12].

Basic principles

i. Man is not an object but an existence to be defined. The existential approach rejects causality and states that past events cannot be the cause of future problems (Büyükdevenci, 1994; Sarte, 1997); cited in Koçak & Gökler [13].

ii. It emphasizes the unity of the world and the individual by opposing the subject-object dualism. It does not try to explain the existence of the individual in terms of ego, archetypes and instincts. The person is everything that exists now, that is, he is in a phenomenological structure and the aim of therapy is to explain this phenomenological structure (Gazda, 1989); cited in Koçak and Gökler [13].

iii. The person becomes free by taking responsibility for himself and thus makes his life more meaningful. The goal of existential therapy is to enable the client to take responsibility for themselves.

iv. Like life, death is an existential phenomenon. One can also overcome death anxiety if one faces death and takes responsibility.

v. Reality is as perceived by the individual. Therefore, the goal of therapy is to understand the individual's thoughts and behaviors from his or her point of view.

vi. Techniques and methods are not mentioned much in existential therapy. Because the use of techniques will cause the client to be treated as an object. This will impair the effectiveness of the consultation process Koçak & Gökler [13].

View of Human Nature

Existential thinker Jean Paul Sarte argued that there is no such thing as "human nature" unless our nature is essentially nothing to be. There is an absence at the very center of our existence. We become something through the choices we make; so we can feed ourselves. What we are is never certain; Doesn't mean it will never change. On the contrary, our situation is in a continuous process and is constantly changing. Therefore, talking about personality types or "Who am I?" Even asking the question is pointless. Many existentialists have approached the concept of "self" as a construction, a practical construct. According to the existential perspective, the self; an identifiable and drawn concrete entity is not a thing. A new self emerges from time to time, each new experience carries us to a new place, and we can never fully return to where we were before (Young, 2000; cited in İlgar & C. İlgar. 2019, p.200). Its non-dogmatic nature is important in defining the essence of existential thought; Concepts such as "being honest", "introspection" and "valuing critical thinking" about the status of human beings, and "believing in the potential of human beings" without ignoring their limits Hoffman, 2015; cited in İlk & Bilici [7].

Therapeutic Process

According to Young (2000), the therapist and the client act according to their mutual relations in the therapy process. What the client reveals to the therapist will not be the same as what they reveal to another therapist. Likewise, the therapist's response will vary from client to client. Who an individual is depends on the relationship he or she is in at that moment İlgar & Coşgun İlgar [4]. According to Gençtan [2], the technique of existential therapy changes with each new client. The therapist should approach the client in a phenomenological perception by participating in the client's world (Çelik, 2017).

The Therapist's Role

There are no specific rules for this therapy. Based on the existential approach, each therapist should create their own unique working style. Based on this situation, it should be given to the clients to determine the subject of the session İlgar & Coşgun

İlgar [4]. The therapist should gather information by asking how. However, while collecting information, it should not be directive and too active, and should be limited to what the client tells. It should stay in the present rather than the past or the future. It is not recommended to use metaphors in the first session as it will prevent the client from expressing their experiences in their own words Üstündağ [14]. Existential therapists are active in the therapy process, but instead of offering a solution to the client, they encourage them to face existential realities. Therapists do not enter into a formal evaluation process as it will disrupt the natural interaction. In existential therapy, therapists are not interested in techniques like contemporary theory therapists. According to them, the purpose of therapy is an effort to understand clients with the world they live in. The therapist can use techniques that can reveal the client's existence with flexibility and versatility Yıkılmaz [10].

Therapists try to define normal rather than abnormal. James Bugental defines the normal person as "The self that changes even if it is shaped: the normal person is the one who has options, finite, even if isolated, in a relationship, always in a process of change" Schneider & Kung, 2015; cited in Yetkin [6]. "The existential approach is a process of searching for meaning and value in life. The purpose of existential therapy is to encourage the client in the process of seeking meaning and purpose in life by focusing on the client's current time" Sharp & Bugental, 2001; cited in Corey [8]. In the therapy process, the therapist asks about the patient's belief system, the love relationships he has developed with other people, his hopes and goals for the future, and tries to get to know him by exploring his creative interests. This recognition process also includes the activities of seeking meaning and providing the meaning sought by the client Yalom, 2001; cited in Yıkılmaz [10].

Relationship between Therapist and Client

The main purpose of this therapy is to help clients find their life purpose, take responsibility and gain awareness. The relationship between the client and the counselor is very important for change. This relationship should be empathetic, sincere and supportive Seligman, 2006; cited in Demir [15]. According to existential therapy, the client should be evaluated independently of their past. The effect of past experiences on the current behavior of the client is not ignored, but the root of the client's problems is not sought in the past Deurzen, 2012; cited in Yetkin [6]. In this approach, the therapist and the client are equal, the therapist does not consider himself superior and respects the client. It may be more appropriate to use the term 'individuals in therapy' rather than client-therapist. During the therapy process, both the client and the therapist will be affected and change. The client comes to therapy for their concerns. The therapist also has concerns but does not show it. In the therapy process, the client and the therapist strive for an equal relationship in which they will explore the experience together İlgar & Coşgun İlgar [4].

In therapy, the therapist should evaluate the client in brackets. In other words, the client should approach the client separately from their personal wishes, fantasies and fears Uygur, 2007; cited in Yetkin [6]. Therapists do not characterize their clients as patients. According to them, the client is tired of living and his life skills have weakened. In therapy, the individuality and humanness of the client is respected. The past and future of the client are handled together with their current relationship. However, it is emphasized that life is temporary and subjective. But the impermanence and subjectivity here is not a dismissal of everything. It is emphasized that every moment of life is valuable Yıkılmaz [10]. The purpose of existential therapy is to assist the client in the process of discovering life's purpose. During this process, an environment in which the client will feel safe should be created and an interest-centered relationship should be developed. Thus, the client can realize the opportunities in front of him and take his own responsibility. In this process, the therapist does not express his own ideas, but leaves the right of choice for change to the client İlgar & Coşgun İlgar [4]. It is very important for the therapist to show appropriate reactions at the appropriate time in the trust relationship he will establish with the client Üstündağ [14].

Interventions

Gençtan [2] stated that the technique of the existentialist therapist shows a flexibility that can change from one person to another who comes to treatment, from one stage to another in the treatment process of the same person (Çelik, 2017, p.423). According to this approach, flexible interventions that will be shaped according to each client should be used instead of a fixed technique. We can hear what the individual wants to say when we are silent. Therefore, we can say that the most important intervention in existential therapy is silence. According to the phenomenological approach, nothing is accepted without question. Therefore, the therapist does not hesitate to question the client, and the client is asked to express clearly what he or she has experienced. In the therapy process, all the assumptions of the client are revealed. Thus, it is hoped that important points will emerge for the client İlgar & Coşgun İlgar [4]. Young (2020) emphasizes that the therapist should not interpret what the client is saying. Instead of interpreting, what he understands from the client is expressed. Thus, it will be revealed what the meaning of what is told means for the client İlgar & Coşgun İlgar [4].

The therapy process is interpretation. This interpretation should be short and understandable, independent of the therapist's perspective on life and theoretical orientations Üstündağ [14]. He states that therapists who adopt the existential approach should apply the techniques they will use, taking into account the problems and needs of their clients, and realizing whether people are ready for this technique or not. The basic rule in this regard is that each client is unique and that there is a separate form of intervention for each client. (Deurzen-Smith,

1997; Walsh & McEhvain, 2002, cited in Üstündağ [14]. Corey [8] explained the therapeutic process in three stages, namely initiation, development and final stages. At the initial stage, the client's assumptions about the world are tried to be determined. In the development phase, clients are encouraged to examine the resources they have and the effects of those resources. In the final stage, the clients are assisted to digest and put into practice what they have learned about themselves.

Application Areas of Existential Therapy

According to Van Deurzen-Smith (1990), this therapy is the most appropriate therapy for clients trying to cope with life-related problems. It can be very effective on individuals who are in deep mourning or trying to cope with changes in personal circumstances such as losing their job Corey [8]. Bungetal and Bracke (1992) emphasized that it can be effective for individuals who are trying to add meaning to their lives, who are in search of identity, and who suffer from feelings of emptiness Corey [8].

Group Therapy

In existential therapy, the individual realizes that at the beginning of the counseling process, he spends most of his energy on his problems and existential concerns and therefore cannot be authentic. He starts to discover himself in the group and starts to be authentic by getting rid of his defenses and anxieties. This process is an important step in solving the individual's discomfort. In group therapy, it enables people to determine their life goals and realize their responsibilities by being influenced by each other (Gazda, 1989; cited in Koçak & Gökler [13].

According to the existential approach, the following stages are followed in individual and group therapy (Öner, 1992, Orr, 1998; cited in Koçak & Gökler [13].

i. The individual perceives how he or she looks from the eyes of others.

ii. The individual realizes how his own behavior affects others.

iii. With the sharing of experiences in the here and now, the individual realizes different aspects about himself and starts to change.

iv. The person realizes that his behavior with group members affects his own ideas [14].

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