

PHD DISSERTATION THESES

**BE YOURSELF! BUT WHICH ONE?**

*The philosophical idea(l) of authenticity in existential philosophy and psychotherapy*

LEHEL BALOGH

Supervisors:

Dr. János Tóth

Dr. Anikó Juhász

UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED

Philosophical Doctoral Institute

Ethics, Social and Applied Philosophy Program

Szeged, 2012

## **Goals and objectives: appointing the limits and scope of the investigation**

„*Just be yourself and everything is gonna be all right.*” This short and trivial sentence, however simple and banal it may sound, hides much within, and epitomizes all that I propose to investigate in my dissertation. For it expresses a deeply rooted belief, a conviction whose origins and value have been almost completely ignored: that if man becomes himself, everything is going to be all right. What does this tell us? First, that man is not being himself. Second, that not everything is all right. Thus I shall investigate how is it possible that man does not coincide with himself, why does this pose a problem, and how to remedy this situation. In other words, I go after the transformation and getting over of a certain philosophical tradition`s – existentialism – characteristic notion – authenticity – to our everyday lives` praxis through the practice of psychotherapy.

“Be spontaneous, be yourself!”, we can hear this and other similar pieces of life guiding advice from our friends, teachers, we can read them in our favourite novels, or can easily decipher their general presence on paintings, photographs, movies and, likewise, in commonplace thinking. If somebody does not behave the way we would expect him to behave, that is, if he is out of character, it triggers surprise, or, at times, abashment, or even disapproval. What does this indicate? That we all assume: people do possess a fixed and stable character that characterizes them (Dad is courageous, Steve is smart, Erika is deceptive etc.). Character is called character precisely because it characterizes. When someone does not match the picture of his character he is not being himself. If a drunken person severely offends his boss, verbally abuses his wife, and slaps his son, we often say: because of the alcohol he is currently *not* being *himself*. When he sobers up, recalling his memories may make him feel ashamed of *himself* for doing – under the influence of the booze – what he did as *not himself*. To his apologies, his boss, wife and son might react: “you are being *yourself* again, at last”. This reaction implies that everybody feels it natural that we are capable of being not ourselves, and on the other hand, that this is merely a temporary and less appropriate state of ours, compared to the one when we coincide with ourselves. Shame is, among others, the sign of us accepting this very conviction, too, that we should behave as ourselves, we should stick to our character, and any deviation from the familiar shores is dangerous and, at the same time, morally wrong.

In order to become ourselves, first we need to get to know to our *selves*. But how is it possible to get to know to a self that exists only amidst constant change and fluctuation? Furthermore, is there, at all, a unified ideal of authenticity within the existentialist tradition, or rather every author means something else by using the expressions “self”, and “becoming oneself”? Inauthenticity, that is when we do not coincide with ourselves, is evidently a less valuable state of existence than authenticity for all the philosophers we are to examine. It is not a marginal question, then, whether being inauthentic carries any moral weight. As for Heidegger, as is well known, he does not have an ethical work. He himself expressed it several times crystal clearly that any attempt for moral interpretation of his seemingly ethical concepts in *Being and Time* – like conscience, sin, freedom, autonomy, etc. – is out of tone. Nevertheless, it is rather confusing, to say the least, that he finds appropriate to use these very terms for labeling the allegedly purely ontological categories. That is why it is not remarkably surprising that many still interpret his notion of authenticity as an ethical ideal, instead of plainly accepting Heidegger’s insistence on the moral neutrality of them.

Heidegger might not, but Sartre certainly did care about ethics and wrote in great detail on the subject, in connection with authenticity and inauthenticity. This is the tradition upon which existential psychiatry and psychotherapy had established its theory and practice. Existential psychotherapy is a unique approach in virtue of the fact that it scrutinizes psychic phenomena from an existentialist point of view. What it entails is that existential therapists understand man as Being-in-the-World or existence, not as a substantive subject that is torn from the objective, “outside” reality. Existential psychiatry began forming around the first reception of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* – that is, the 1930s – but it had become really influential from the 1960s. At the beginning, such psychiatrists like Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss had attempted to elaborate on the putting into practice what Heidegger had to say about Dasein’s fundamental ontological structures. What this means is that under the name of *Daseinanalysis*, both Binswanger and Boss worked on how one might utilize phenomenology’s insights in understanding and curing the mentally ill. Later on, the Austrian-born Viktor Frankl also established a distinct existential school for which he coined the name, *Logotherapy*, and which is alive and kicking ever since.

By the end of the 1950s, the existential approach to psychiatry and psychotherapy has arrived in the US, and, along with the so-called humanistic movements in psychology, it has

gained considerable influence after a remarkably brief period of time. Rollo May and Irvin Yalom are the most well-known and acknowledged representatives of the American school. Meanwhile in Great Britain, it was Ronald Laing who first offered analyses of psychopathological and psychotherapeutic phenomena from an existential-phenomenological stance. Later on members of the *British School of Existential Analysis* came to reform the principles of existential therapy. Their objective was to strip, as much as possible, the therapeutic setting from the urge to diagnose the exact “disease”, the pathologization, and the habit of moral evaluation of medical data. Instead they suggested that therapy should focus on the phenomenological description of the “lived world” of the patient. The most notable existential therapists of the British School are Emmy van Deurzen, Hans Cohn and Ernesto Spinelli.

Existential psychiatry and therapy were born out of the elementary dissatisfaction with the ways psychiatrists tried to cure conventionally conceived “diseases” of conventionally conceived “subjects”, whereas, for existentialists none of these are adequate modes of either grasping human reality, or trying to advance the well-being of the individual. In my dissertation, I essay to critically inspect, via a concrete phenomenon, the actual appearance of existential philosophy in practice. The medium in which I analyse existential philosophy manifesting itself into practical life is existential psychotherapy, while the concrete phenomenon that guided the directions and the limits of the investigations is the idea(l) of authenticity; that is to say, the metamorphoses and getting over of the philosophical ideal of authenticity to the realm of psychotherapy. As I was intent to demonstrate, authenticity is *the* central concept of philosophical and psychotherapeutic relevance that provides the specific feature of existential psychotherapy. The essential function and aim of therapy is, thus, nothing less than to lead the individual to his authentic self. Then again, the firm belief in the veracity of the claim that becoming yourself brings you mental health, or, to put it in another way, that mental health is the *same* as authenticity, is conditioned by existential philosophy itself.

Nonetheless, I believe it is important to emphasize that the theoreticians of existential psychotherapy did, right from the beginning, misinterpret and re-form – intentionally or not – the various teachings of existential philosophers according to their own taste and needs. Although I reckon that this was a necessary step they were pressed to make, for these

philosophically unacceptable misinterpretations had led to an utterly viable practice. So much so that I have had gradually come to acquire a hunch that the particular analyses of existential philosophies, though aspiring to reveal human reality in the most complete and creditable manner possible, sometimes failed to stick to actual human reality. So, from psychotherapy's point of view, it had become inevitable to revise some of the concepts and ideas of existential philosophy, in order to transform and, occasionally, even correct them, for better usage in real life situations. Examination of these phenomena was also part of the task I had taken on.

### *The thread and directions of the examinations*

The thread of my examination was laid down by the following up of the changing notion of authenticity *qua* genuine mode of being of human individuals. The dissertation has been articulated into the following structure:

*Chapter I:* The analysis of the philosophical concept of authenticity in the works of five prominent existential philosophers' *oeuvre*. The first subsection deals with Kierkegaard's, the second with Nietzsche's, the third with Jaspers', the fourth with Heidegger's, and the fifth with Sartre's relevant passages.

*Chapter II:* The analysis of the therapeutical ideal of authenticity in eminent existential psychotherapists' works. The first subsection examines the beginnings of existential psychotherapy (Jaspers' topical writings, the Daseinanalysis, and Logotherapy), the second the American existential psychotherapy, the third R. D. Laing's existential-phenomenological approach, and the fourth the British School's (in particular, van Deurzen's) teachings.

*Chapter III:* Critical analyses by way of outlining the path roamed about by the ideal of authenticity. The final chapter seeks to find answer to the question whether practical application of existential philosophy unavoidably leads to the misinterpretation, oversimplification, and revision of certain particular philosophical concepts. On the other hand, I also query if the self-interpretation of existential psychotherapy is being carried out in good faith indeed, that is, to what extent is it able to exercise in practice what it undertakes: being an entirely value-free therapy. Moreover, I go after the widely held conviction, too, that the imperative of authenticity in our culture, as we know it today, is really the best one if one wants to live a mentally healthy, good life. At this point, I shall point to the inherent

controversies and dangers residing in the ideal of authenticity, along with showing the relationship of this ideal to morality. Does existential therapy cultivate deviance, the deviation from society's norms, and, through this, immoralism? I propose to give an attempt to answer these questions as well.

### **Results of the dissertation**

Hopefully, the analyses of the dissertation demonstrated clearly that the ideal of authenticity cannot be synthesized into one, single, coherent concept, simply because various existentialist philosophers gave very different, and, at times, divergent accounts of how one should become oneself, and what does this all entail. Being authentic implies that one is absolutely honest to oneself. It is a common point for everybody, no doubt about that. However, the concept of authenticity is not equal to any of the concepts of honesty, autonomy, or self-realization. Self-realization, for instance, is a morally edifying ideal of whose origins can be traced back to the era of Romanticism. It takes for granted a moral subject that is apparently much more integrated, compact and capable of completion than the one offered by existentialism which is essentially a possibility-for-being, not an already fixed substance.

The investigations also pointed out that existential psychiatry misunderstood or deliberately misinterpreted several core existential concepts. A good example is the case of *anxiety* (Angst) which, for every single last one of the existentialist philosophers, is fundamentally different from *fear*, in that significant respect that whereas fear always has an object, anxiety never does. This basic differentiation obviously did not made its way through to existential psychiatry and psychotherapy. But this is, in my view, absolutely understandable, moreover, acceptable, because, for psychotherapy, anxiety *must* have an object, otherwise it is incomprehensible and of no use for therapeutic purposes. A like misunderstanding or misinterpretation derives from the confusion about the "nature" of authenticity. At many occasions, I have attempted to show that the ideal of authenticity in psychotherapy differs overly from any of those we can find in philosophers' writings. For Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre, becoming authentic, becoming truly who one is, is an imperative open only for the few. Nietzsche acknowledges this, Sartre unfortunately does not. Initially, the ideal of authenticity was an openly elitist ideal, which despised the mob, and

celebrated the – rare – noble individual. However, in psychiatry it has become a fairly democratic and universal ideal which can be “attained” by virtually anyone and everyone.

When analyzing Heidegger’s argumentations about *Eigentlichkeit*, I have devoted a considerable amount of time to clarify the status of the allegedly ethical connotations of numerous terms. Contrary to the generally accepted belief, I claim that authenticity for Heidegger is *not* an ethical concept, but it can be perfectly understood and interpreted within the framework of the philosophical mega-enterprise of fundamental ontology. It is not only that Heidegger himself warns us several times of the incorrectness of mistaking authenticity as ontic, instead of ontological, but also the very logic and word of *Being and Time* consistently maintains that there is nothing of ethical relevance to it. *Being and Time* questions the meaning of Being, nothing less, nothing more. Since ethics, as a particular ontic field, is beyond ontological investigations, to me it seems too pushy to force moral dimensions into ontological notions, such as *Geworfenheit* or *Eigentlichkeit*. Not that Heidegger had no moral concerns. But authenticity, just as inauthenticity, is a mode of *being*, not a moral category. As I have demonstrated, even the later works of Heidegger, which were written after the *Kehre*, do not alter the general picture that what he had been doing is ontology, not a moral quest.

Among the results of the dissertation is the assertion that psychotherapy devoid of moral values is impossible to realize, because the therapist will always orient the patient in his self-interpretation, either by words, or by lack of words. As soon as we acknowledge this fact it becomes mere hypocrisy maintaining that the therapist does not influence the patient in any respect, and that the patient has to find his authentic mode of being only by himself. Psychotherapy has always been and always will be the expression of a certain ideology that defends and propagates a concrete set of values, no matter how subtly and undetectably it does so. Existential psychotherapy is committed to the ideal of authenticity which, in turn, is fully loaded by some very distinctly describable moral values.

As for the accusations of deviance and immoralism, I am compelled to say that existential philosophy and psychiatry do, indeed, cultivate some sort of deviance from the traditional norms of the society, *but* does not, as a general rule, support immoralism. Except for the only Nietzsche nobody encourages people to kick up the dust, just for kicks. As a matter of fact, Nietzsche is not at all on the side of complete arbitrariness, but the reason why

he stands up for the reevaluation of values is in the hope of finding “more useful”, more noble values, replacing the current ones. Furthermore, immoralism is not even advocated by Sartre, even though for him, considering his metaphysical platform, it is harder to avoid immoralism than to accept it. Finally, existential psychotherapists can not in the least said to be favoring immoralism. Suffice it to say that they promote such traditional moral values as love, honesty, engagement, taking responsibility for one’s promises, and so forth. If existential psychotherapy supports deviance, it does so because it attempts to shake the foundations of the exclusivist tendencies of the society that attempts to “normalize” every individual to a very narrow standard of acceptable and desirable traits. In this respect, existential psychotherapy is markedly democratic and accepting. However, tolerance, taken to its extreme, is an ideal that is self-destructing: tolerating intolerance in obviously intolerable. That is why existential therapy’s tolerance also has its limits.

When existential therapy advises us, “Be yourself!” a question arises instantly: who am I? Existentialism renders a promise towards the individual who wants only to shake off the heavy moral shackles of society. The promise consists of this: it is possible to find one’s genuine self, and as it happens, one finds oneself in an unimaginable spaciousness of freedom, after having been dipped into the uniqueness of one’s own being, a new, a happy, a truer life sets off. This vision, however, forgets to take it into account that the process of becoming ourselves is *always a directed process*. It is never me who first thinks about the need and necessity to “truly” become myself. The particular culture which I live in radiates the *expectation* through many channels that I *shall* become myself. If it was not for the culture most probably it would never even cross my mind that I am not being myself. It is the culture that informs me, and, at the same time, creates the demand in me to be authentic. How was this demand created at the first place? According to Charles Taylor, it is due to countless historical, cultural, and philosophical interactions that we came to live in an era in which the “Ethics of Authenticity” rules. In this era our ways of thinking have been defined by the chase after our “genuine” and “real” selves. Everybody appears to know who he is and who he should become to be authentic. Then again, we hardly notice that the demand itself was not created by us: the want to become authentic does not come from our authentic decision. What this means is that the ideal of authenticity cannot be the only one, and perhaps it is not even of the better ones, to save people from unnecessary mental suffering.