

Practising Existential Therapy

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Existential Therapy: Three Key Principles

The Im/possibility of Existential Therapy

Existential Therapy is no kind of therapy. Paul F. Colaizzi

In an approach that is already overflowing with paradoxes, here is yet another – currently, the living therapist and author most often associated with contemporary existential therapy and recognised by professionals and public alike as *the* leading voice in the field is the American psychiatrist, Irvin Yalom. For example, in a recent survey, over 1,300 existential therapists were asked to name the practitioner who had most influenced them. Yalom ranked second on that list (following Viktor Frankl (1905–1997), the founder of Logotherapy) and was at the top of their list of living practitioners (Correia, Cooper & Berdondini (2014); Iacovou, 2013). Nevertheless, Yalom has stated that there is no such thing as existential therapy *per se* (Yalom, 2007). Instead, he has argued that therapies can be distinguished by the degree to which they are willing and able to address various existence themes, or ultimate concerns, such as death, freedom, meaning and isolation, within the therapeutic encounter (Cooper, 2003; Yalom, 1980, 1989). From this Yalomian perspective, any approach to therapy that is informed by these *thematic existence concerns* and addresses them directly in its practice would be an existential therapy.

As an existential therapist, I continue to admire Yalom's contributions and to learn from his writings and seminars. It has been my honour to have engaged in a joint seminar with him during which we each presented some of our ideas and perspectives (Yalom & Spinelli, 2007). Nonetheless, as the title of this text makes plain, unlike Yalom I see existential therapy as a distinct approach that has its own specific 'take' on the issues that remain central to therapy as a whole. Further, as I understand it, existential therapy's stance toward such issues provides the means for a series of significant challenges that are critical of contemporary therapy and its aims as they are predominantly understood and practised (Spinelli, 2005, 2007, 2008).

Viewing both perspectives, holding them in relation to one another, an interesting and helpful clarification emerges – an important distinction can be made between therapies that address thematic existence concerns and a particular approach to therapy that is labelled as existential therapy.

Like me, the great majority of writers, researchers and practitioners who identify themselves as existential therapists would disagree with Yalom's contention that there cannot be a distinctive existential model or approach to therapy. Nonetheless, as I see it, they would also tend to be in complete agreement with him in that they, too, place a central focus on the various thematic existence concerns such as death and death anxiety, meaning and meaninglessness, freedom and choice as the primary means to identify existential therapy and distinguish it from other models. As was argued in the Introduction, in my view they are making a fundamental error in this because, as Yalom correctly argues, these various thematic existence concerns also can be identified with numerous – perhaps all – therapeutic approaches. For example, a wide variety of models other than existential therapy address issues centred upon the role and significance of meaning, as well as the impact of its loss, its lack and its revisions (Siegelman, 1993; Wong, 2012). Similarly, the notion of death anxiety is as much a thematic undercurrent of psychoanalytic models as it is of existential therapy (Gay, 1988).

A further problem also presents itself – if *only* thematic existence concerns are highlighted as defining elements of existential therapy then it becomes possible to argue (however absurdly) that any philosopher, psychologist, scientist or spiritual leader who has ever made statements regarding some aspect of human existence can be justifiably designated as 'an existential author/thinker/practitioner'. In similar 'nothing but' fashion, from this same thematic perspective, any number of therapeutic models can make claims to being 'existential', just as existential therapy can argue that, at heart, all models of therapy are, ultimately, existential. While there may well be some dubious value in pursuing such arguments, nonetheless they impede all attempts to draw out just what may be distinctive about existential therapy.

In my view, it is necessary to step beyond – or beneath – thematic existence concerns themselves and instead highlight the existential 'grounding' or *foundational Principles* from which they are being addressed. In doing so, a great deal of the difficulty in clarifying both what existential therapy is, and what makes it discrete as an approach, is alleviated.

I believe that very few existential therapists have confronted the significance of these two differing perspectives. As suggested in the Introduction to this text, one therapist who has done so is Paul Colaizzi. In his paper entitled 'Psychotherapy and existential therapy' (Colaizzi, 2002), Colaizzi highlights what he saw as the fundamental difference between existential therapy and all other psychotherapies, that is, whereas psychotherapy models confront, deal with and seek to rectify the problems of living, existential therapy concerns itself with the issues of existence that underpin the problems of living. In order to clarify this distinction, Colaizzi employs the example of a bridge. He argues that if we were to identify all of the

material elements that go into the creation of the bridge, none of them can rightly be claimed to *be* the bridge. The material elements are necessary for the bridge to exist, but no material permitting the construction of the bridge is itself 'bridge-like'. For the bridge to exist requires a 'boundary spanning' from the material elements to the existential possibility that permits 'the bridgeness of the bridge'. In similar fashion,

Life is the unbridgelike, unstretching material of the bridge of existence. And acts of living as the segments of life are the pieces of material which fit into the spanning of existence. But these life contents are not themselves existence; they do not stretch or span across the whole of individual, finite temporality.

It is existence which infuses life contents with any meaning they have, just as spannedness infuses bridge material with the meaning of bridge material. Just as no parts of the bridge span across boundaries but rather fit into spannedness, no life contents span across space and time. (Colaizzi, 2002: 75–76)

For Colaizzi, psychotherapy concerns, and limits, itself with life issues which he sees as being the equivalent of the material elements that are necessary for bridges to exist. Existential therapy, on the other hand, should be more concerned with the 'boundary spanning' or 'stretching' of life issues so that it is 'the lifeness of life issues' (just as 'the bridgeness of the bridge') that becomes its primary focus.

Colaizzi's argument is often poetically elusive. However, I believe the issues he addresses are central to the understanding of existential therapy. Although I am not always in agreement with some specific aspects of his discussion, I think that Colaizzi is correct in pointing out that existential therapists have tended to over-emphasise the thematic concerns that make up the 'materials' of existence. If, instead, we were to take up his challenge and focus more on what may be 'the existentialness of existential therapy', what might we discover?

What are Key Defining Principles?

We face each other in the betweenness between us. Watsuji Tetsurō

Most models of therapy are able to embrace competing interpretations dealing with any and every aspect of theory and practice. Regardless of how different these may be, they remain 'housed' within a shared model. What allows this to be so? All models and approaches contain shared *foundational Principles*, what existential phenomenologists might refer to as 'universal structures' that underpin all the variant perspectives within a model, thereby identifying it and distinguishing it from any other. Both psychoanalysis and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), for example, are each made identifiable and distinctive through such foundational Principles. For

instance, the assumption of a separate and discrete mental processing system – the *unconscious* – in contrast to that of conscious processing – is a foundational Principle to be found in all variants of psychoanalytic thought. In the same way, the foundational Principles of transference and counter-transference run through all modes of psychoanalytic practice (Ellenberger, 1970; Smith, 1991). Similarly, within CBT, which consists of a huge diversity of views and, at times, quite starkly contrasting emphases, there also exists at least one key underlying Principle that runs across, and to this extent unifies, its various strands – their shared allegiance to, and reliance upon, formal experimental design as the critical means to both verify and amend clinical hypotheses (Salkovskis, 2002).

As important as they are in providing the means by which both to identify a model and to reveal its uniqueness, it is surprising to discover that these foundational Principles are rarely made explicit by the majority of practising therapists. This seems somewhat odd since it is through such Principles that the uniqueness of any specific model is revealed. Whatever this might say about the state of contemporary therapy, what is important to the present discussion is the acknowledgement that if an agreed-upon set of foundational Principles for existential therapy can be discerned, then it becomes more possible to clarify what unites its various and diverse interpretations.

When considering existential therapy, it is difficult not to conclude that there are as many unique expressions of existential therapy as there are unique beings who engage in and practise it. Thus, it is something of a challenge to claim, much less provide evidence for, the existence of shared underlying Principles in the practice of existential therapy – unless one were to argue that the one governing Principle was that of *rejecting* any foundational Principles. Avoiding that conclusion, this book argues that existential therapy rests upon three key foundational Principles. I will discuss these below and in Part Two I will provide a structural model for practising existential therapy that I believe remains true to these Principles.

Implicit in this enterprise lies a desire to challenge existential therapists to consider critically whether their ways of ‘doing’ existential therapy might be taking on board attitudes, assumptions and behavioural stances that originate from other models but which might not ‘fit’ all that well, if at all, with the aims and aspirations of existential therapy. For example, when considering issues such as therapist disclosures and anonymity might existential therapists be unnecessarily adopting stances that are indistinguishable from those assumed by other approaches? Perhaps, with reflection, the decision to do so might well turn out to be both sensible and appropriate. But it may also be possible that, much like Medard Boss’ *daseinsanalysis*, which maintains the basic structural stance of psychoanalysis but ‘situates’ this within a distinctly different, even contradictory, theoretical system (Boss, 1963, 1979), existential therapists have *assumed* attitudes, stances and structures borrowed from other traditions and considered them as required for the practice of therapy without sufficient questioning of these assumptions. Again, in Part Two, I have provided a structural model for practising existential therapy that acknowledges and utilises various contributions from other models while at the same time avoiding

being unnecessarily burdened by the structural stances, assumptions and practices derived from them that are inconsistent with its foundational Principles.

Obviously, no enterprise that attempts to respond to these challenges should either dismiss or deny current standards and ethics of practice as delineated by Governing Bodies for the profession of therapy. If it wishes to be acknowledged and approved by these Bodies, any model of existential therapy must remain situated within the facticity of their professional rules and regulations. As such, there is nothing considered or discussed in this text that does not adhere to currently existing standards of practice as presented by the major UK and international Professional Bodies. Nonetheless, at its broadest level, the model under discussion seeks to bring back to contemporary notions of therapy a stance that re-emphasises a crucial aspect that is contained within the original meaning of *therapeia* – namely, the enterprise of ‘attending to’ another via the attempt to stand beside, or with, that other as he or she is being and acts in or upon the world (Evans, 1981). Although I believe this notion to be a broadly shared enterprise of all existential therapists, why they should take this stance is best clarified when linked to the foundational Principles of the approach.

Which leads to the obvious question: Just what are existential therapy’s foundational Principles?

Existential Therapy’s Three Foundational Principles

What is spoken is never, and in no language, what is said. Martin Heidegger

Existential phenomenology, as a unique system of philosophically attuned investigation, arose in the early years of the twentieth century. Although it is composed of many interpretative strands and emphases, at its heart is the attempt to grapple with the dilemma of dualism. Dualism has multiple manifestations: the distinctiveness of mind and matter – or lack of it – has been the source of centuries-spanning ongoing debates between idealists and materialists. Such debates, in turn, have confronted issues centred upon everything from the nature of reality in general, to the (assumed) dichotomy between consciousness and the brain, self and other, intellect and emotion, good and evil, male and female and so forth. From the standpoint of structured investigation, which is the hallmark of Western science, dualistic debates have focused on the interplay between the ‘subject’ (the observer/investigator) and the ‘object’ (the observed/the focus of investigation) and whether claims made regarding truly objective data entirely detached from the investigator’s influence are valid and reliable.

Yet another, somewhat different, aspect of dualism can be seen in contemporary theories of physics wherein two mutually exclusive mechanisms are *equally* required for the most adequate understanding of a particular principle. Theories addressing the wave–particle duality of matter would be an example of this (Selleri, 2013). It is important to recognise that this second expression of dualism

differs significantly from the others in that it does not adopt the more prevalent 'either/or' stance that separates the contradictory categories under focus. Instead, the contradictory categories are viewed from a 'both/and' stance of necessary complementary co-existence.

This 'both/and' perspective is uncommon in Western thought. We prefer our dualities to be mutually exclusive and separate rather than complementary and often paradoxical. Our language is so significantly geared toward this preference that, when seeking to express a 'both/and' stance, it exacerbates the dilemma by imposing the terminology of contradiction/separatism upon that of complementarity/paradox. For example, other than via mathematics, it seems to be impossible to express the complementary/paradoxical view of 'wave-particle theory' without resorting to contradictory/separatist language.

I raise this last point because it highlights a critical dilemma. Existential phenomenology has often been presented as an approach that has sought to remove the dominance of dualism from our thought and practice. While not incorrect, this conclusion often leads to the assumption that existential phenomenology is linked entirely to monist perspectives which deny any apparent dualism through the reductive emphasis upon a single unifying mechanism or substance. For example, dominant monist stances on body-mind dualism insist that either no truly distinct and separate 'mind' exists and all seemingly mental phenomena are solely materially (i.e. brain-) derived or that mental phenomena can be identified but only as outcomes of (admittedly complex) brain activity. Following this monist stance, neuroscientists are broadly in agreement that consciousness *is* the electrical activity of cortex neurons that have been assembled in a series of inter-connecting networks (Smythies, 2014).

While many would argue that an existential phenomenological perspective rejects dualism and in some way must espouse some sort of monist position, I don't think that such a hard-line stance is necessary to adopt without diminishing the impact of its challenges. Instead, I would like to suggest that existential phenomenology's foundational perspective, being neither exclusively idealist nor exclusively materialist, is much more akin to that of the complementary/paradoxical stance adopted by theoretical physics. In promoting this 'both/and' perspective, it addresses dualist concerns without favouring one aspect of the perceived duality over the other but, rather, by arguing that the dual opposites co-exist equally and inseparably as mutually influencing continuum *polarities*. For instance, from this existential phenomenological perspective, mind-body dualism shifts away from 'either/or' debates which prioritise one component over the other, and attempts to give equal value to seemingly separately existing components (i.e. mind *and* body) by arguing for a paradoxically 'indivisible dualism' (i.e. 'mindbody' or 'bodymind') that is expressed via polarities.

Nonetheless, this proposed shift retains the same problems of language as were noted in the attempts by contemporary physics to address various theories such as those that consider matter from wave-particle perspectives. The English language, for example, seems to be structured in ways that are inimical to the

articulation of existential phenomenological perspectives. As a consequence, all attempts to do so must resort to statements that are inevitably imbued with an inherent separatist, ‘either/or’ dualism which, in turn, confounds the meaning of the statement and confuses its intent. For instance, in order to assert the key principle of indivisible relatedness (as will be discussed below), existential therapists often employ the term *being-in-the-world* (Cooper, 2003). Even so, and in spite of the attempt to express a polarity-derived unified duality via the hyphenation between the words, the term still suggests a conjunction of two separate and distinct entities, namely ‘the being’ and ‘the world’. On further consideration, even the introduction of novel terms, such as *dasein* (Heidegger, 1962), that attempt to convey that this polarity cannot be defined without recourse to an explanatory language imbued with contradictory separatism. As such, not only does the ‘alien language’ of existential phenomenology fail to fulfil its intent, it adds substantially to the (in my opinion, erroneous) view held by many that the ideas and concepts being propounded are too difficult, too abstract and too limited to have any useful therapeutic applications.

Is there *any* way out of this linguistic dilemma? Probably not. Still, problematic as novel terms can be, at least they serve to expose the separatist dualism that is so embedded in our thought and language. That challenge in itself, even without the provision of a fully developed alternative, can have significant impact. Perhaps, as well, *indirect* challenges that point us toward the alternative perspective through metaphor and allusion, can also provoke an experiential understanding that shifts us beyond the limitations of the language being employed so that we grasp more adequately what it is intending to express. What is evident nonetheless is that, in spite of such difficulties, existential phenomenology’s arguments and concerns continue to tantalise many of those who come upon them, be they philosophers, psychologists or therapists. I suspect that it is these very same difficulties which are the key to its continuing allure. Most significantly, in attempting to investigate fundamental issues of existence from a complementary and paradoxical (‘both/and’) perspective, the foundational Principles of existential phenomenology become much more readily identifiable. Three of these Principles in particular – *relatedness*, *uncertainty* and *existential anxiety* – are, in my view, not only critical to existential phenomenology as a whole; they also provide the basic rationale to any attempt at practising existential therapy.

The First Principle: Existential Relatedness

The world and I are within one another. Maurice Merleau-Ponty

The principle of *relatedness* is so pivotal to the whole rationale of existential phenomenology that its presence and influence resonates through its every point and argument. Because it is so foundational, and at the same time so often counter-intuitive to Western thought, it requires extended consideration.

Relatedness can be understood at both a surface and deeper level. The former is more initially accessible, but, I think, ultimately too limiting of what is intended. The latter, for the linguistic reasons discussed above, cannot be expressed directly but can be approached through analogies which can be helpful but, in common with any analogy, remain unable to express or contain all that the Principle proposes.

At its simplest, surface level, relatedness argues that everything that exists is always in an inseparable relation to everything else. From this understanding of relatedness, every thought, feeling and action experienced or undertaken by me is said to arise not only from the interaction of systems and components *within* me as a bounded organism, but also from the interaction *between* bounded organisms (which is to say, between self and others and between self and world). Even at this surface level, the Principle of relatedness can be seen to have enormous implications, not least because it no longer permits an exclusively isolationist subjectivity capable of generating its own internally generated reflections upon its experience of being. At the same time, numerous other approaches, perhaps most obviously systemic approaches, would argue something pretty much identical to this viewpoint (Hills, 2012). What makes the existential phenomenological perspective on relatedness significantly different only becomes clearer when its deeper implications are considered.

A Cup of *Being* Tea: An Analogy of Relatedness

Nevertheless, suppose that Descartes had written ...: We think, therefore we are. Suppose that the solipsist constraint is dropped, and that intersubjectivity is taken as a primitive postulate John Ziman

Imagine a cup of tea. Now, imagine that the tea is '*being* tea' in that it is the tea through which all beings emerge. Each spoonful 'bit' of *being* tea expresses and gives rise to a unique, special, unrepeatable, individual being. And, as well, each spoonful 'bit' of *being* tea that is extracted and held up to investigation and then returned to the cup of *being* tea is never exactly the same as any previous or future spoonful. No individual spoonful 'bit' of *being* tea is somehow *more being* tea than any other. Nor is it *less* than any other. Every 'bit' of *being* tea is unique and every 'bit' of *being* tea is the *being* tea.

Now imagine each individual spoonful 'bit' of *being* tea declaring that not only is it unique and unrepeatable, it is also its own originator. It exists out of its own making and can be understood and defined within its own boundaries, separate and distinct from any and all other 'bits' of *being* tea each of whom, as well, can be understood and defined in and of itself without any relational recourse to any or every other 'bit' of *being* tea. Such declarations allow each 'bit' of *being* tea to exist *as if* its existence had nothing whatever to do with the shared cup of *being* tea from which all individual *being* tea 'bits' emerged. Indeed, such declarations allow each 'bit' of *being* tea to forget or deny its source-point.

What this, admittedly silly, analogy highlights is the central challenge that existential phenomenology poses to all those viewpoints and systems that assume an exclusively individually derived, separatist subjectivity as the starting-point to our experience of being. Most obviously, this challenge addresses all those views that in various ways begin with the primacy of an isolated self that is entirely comprehensible within its set of subjectively derived meanings, felt experiences and behaviours. The Principle of relatedness presents us with an alternative to this perspective. It argues that it is only via its prior grounding in relatedness that the self's distinctive and unique sense of being becomes possible. As should now be clearer, an existential phenomenological notion of relatedness argues much more than that each of us, as a separate being, is always in relation to and with all other separate beings. Far more significantly, what it is proposing is that *seemingly separate beings exist only because of a foundational precondition of relatedness*. Each being stands out in a wholly unique and unrepeatable way of being *and* is able to be and do so through a foundational relatedness that is not only shared by all beings but which is also the necessary condition through which individual beings emerge.

As I see it, existential phenomenology argues that Western views of existence, especially since Descartes, have promoted a specifically divisive dualistic mode of interpretative reflecting. In its broadest sense, this way of reflecting has allowed us to construe *being* only as 'boundaried' or 'bounded' (Gergen, 2009) as well as individualistically/subjectively dominated rather than relationally attuned. In short, such forms of reflection have served to reduce relatedness to mere relationship – that is, the interaction of, by and between separate beings whose existence is claimed to be understandable and explicable from an originating, individualistically boundaried perspective. Viewed from an existential phenomenological perspective, however, whatever the stance taken towards relationships – whether seen as desirable or problematic, to be embraced or avoided, sufficient or lacking – it always remains an expression of relatedness. One can avoid, reject or even deny that they are 'in' any sort of relationship; at the same time, those very claims of avoidance, denial or rejection reveal the foundational relatedness from which they emerge. Relatedness is not something that becomes established only under certain circumstances or as a result of particular conditions or which we work towards. Rather, 'relatedness is'. Always.

The significance of, and implications arising from, this first foundational Principle become most apparent when considering the related notions of *subjectivity* and *the individual*.

Relatedness and Subjectivity

Why should the healthy hand attend to the wounded foot? The Buddha

One of the most interesting and important recent attempts to challenge the dominance of subjectivity within Western thought can be found in Kenneth Gergen's book, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community* (Gergen, 2009). Gergen states that the view of the individual as separate and singular is a conception that in the

West took root only four centuries ago. However sensible or obvious this view might seem to us to be today, it remains an unusual idea within a wider cultural context. Gergen's enterprise is to explore the ways in which the idea of bounded being can be replaced by that of relational being. As with the existential phenomenological Principle of relatedness, this enterprise is an attempt

to generate an account of human action that can replace the presumption of bounded selves ... I do not mean relationships between otherwise separate selves, but rather, a process of coordination that precedes the very concept of the self There is no isolated self or fully private experience. Rather we exist in a world of co-constitution. (Gergen, 2009: xv)

Gergen makes his aims clear: he wants to develop a view steeped in relatedness in which there is no prioritising condition of an independent subjectivity. In attempting this, he highlights the action-based consequences of this shift. For example, he challenges the reader to consider the possibility of our language containing no nouns whatsoever. Immediately the stability of a 'thing-based' noun-world is replaced by flow-like, action-based process. In this new language, it would be difficult 'to contain the flow of action into discrete, noun-like entities; like waves of the ocean it is not clear where one movement ends and another begins [T]he world might not appear to us as separate entities ... not discrete "forms" but continuous "forming"' (Gergen, 2009: 30).

Relational Being's arguments and concerns are too rich and numerous for me to provide anything approaching an appropriate summary. I strongly urge readers to discover and engage with this text for themselves. Nonetheless, Gergen's position on relatedness resonates strongly with that being presented here, as are, alas, the linguistic difficulties incurred.

Similar conclusions are presented in one of the last papers written by John Ziman prior to his death in 2005. Coming from a background of theoretical physics, Ziman presented a view of relatedness that challenges 'the axiom of subjectivity' (Ziman, 2006: 18) which runs through scientific enquiry. Specifically, Ziman argues: 'I have not come across any evidence that the subjective mode of consciousness is prior – in the species or in the phenotypical modern individual – to its intersubjective copartner' (ibid.: 23). Acknowledging his agreement with this view and extending its focus, the anthropologist Alan Macfarlane responded to Ziman's conclusion by arguing:

With the growth of comparative anthropology it became clear that our individualistic, capitalistic, self-consciousness, rather than being the normal state of things, is indeed a western peculiarity, something produced by the strange form of individualistic, monotheistic religion and western law and economy. When anthropologists reported back on what they had found in South American or South East Asian jungles, or in New Guinea or among Australian aborigines, they described relational, inter-subjective, world views not wholly different from that which Ziman is suggesting. (Macfarlane, 2006: 46)

Macfarlane argues that it would be wrong to believe that ‘these societies could be ignored as to a certain extent peripheral vestiges of a disappearing world’ (ibid.: 47). On the contrary, he states that

as anthropologists and historians turned their attention increasingly to large, literate, market-based, peasant civilizations outside western Europe they found that they also were based on the premise of inter-subjectivity One example was Chinese civilization A second was India A third comes from the attempts to understand Japanese civilization (ibid.: 47)

All these arguments resonate with existential phenomenology’s assertion that subjectivity is just one variant of a prior foundational state of relatedness and should be understood as an expression of that relatedness. Viewed in this way, subjectivity does not arise or exist in contrast to, nor is it distinct from, relatedness, nor can it be placed alongside relatedness as a separate and alternative mode of *being* and experiencing. Rather, subjectivity is seen as a particular, perhaps culturally specific, emergent consequence of relatedness.

Relatedness and the Individual

It is not that there is experience because there is an individual, but that there is an individual because there is experience. Kitaro Nishida

Addressing the issues surrounding notions of the individual, Gergen has argued that the “‘I’ does not index an origin of action, but a relational achievement’ (Gergen, 2009: 133). In line with this view, the philosopher David Midgley (commenting upon the work of John Ziman as discussed above) agrees with Ziman’s contention that the ‘bias towards atomic individualism not only bedevils the human and social sciences: it distorts the whole philosophy of nature’ (Ziman, 2006: 21). Midgley then extends this view by arguing that ‘individual consciousness is actually a part or subsystem of a larger [interrelational] consciousness’ (Midgley, 2006: 100).

Perhaps the most radical reconsideration of currently dominant views surrounding the individual can be found in the writings of Martin Buber, a philosopher whose ideas have had a major impact upon existential phenomenology. Buber’s now famous contrast between ‘I–It’ and ‘I–Thou’ states that relations between self and other can be viewed in two ways: ‘The other’ can be experienced as a separate *object* whose meaning in relation to the scrutinising ‘I’ is shaped by that ‘I’s’ imposition of its preferred meaning stance. Alternatively, ‘I’ can approach ‘the other’ as an inter-related co-subject through which mutually revealing, unpredictable and impermanent meaning possibilities unfold themselves (Buber, 1970, 2002).

The former is an ‘I–It’ attitude that is grounded in an object-focused stance of separateness and control. The latter is an ‘I–Thou’ attitude that expresses the instability of ever-emergent, co-created engagement *between* persons. If the former demands that the ‘I’ must ‘fix’ him or her self in an attitude of authority, the latter’s

impact opens the 'I' to the reconstituting and redefining of its own meaning base via the equalising attitude taken toward the other. If 'I-It' objectifies both the 'I' and the other ('It'); 'I-Thou' reveals that both 'I' and the other ('Thou') co-exist as an inseparable inter-relation whose truthful meanings are not handed down, directed toward, imposed or predetermined via a process of objectification (Buber, 1970). It is important to clarify that Buber saw both stances as expressions of relatedness. His was not yet another 'either/or' position. Rather, he argued that although relatedness lay at the foundation of each, 'I-It' engagements seek to express relatedness through its denial, while 'I-thou' relations move ever towards its embrace.

Buber further clarified these differing responses to relatedness via his distinction between 'individuals' and 'persons'. He was deeply critical of Western culture's (and much of therapy's) elevation of the isolated, self-sustaining individual. He railed against the sort of 'fascism of self-autonomy' that runs rampant through Western thought and is so alien in its views from those of so many other philosophies and systems in the world (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990). In contrast, his view of the person served as an expression of what it is to be human – a being who inhabits an inseparable relation with the world, and is an expression of that relation. For Buber, being a person means far more than simply individuating. Being a person requires *inclusion*, engaging 'in real reciprocity with the world' (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990: 63).

In taking this view, I suggest, Buber was uncommonly prescient. Today, the constant blathering of marketeers and politicians about the sanctity and protection of 'the individual', and the wants or pursuits associated with it, has permitted an unprecedented and highly manipulable allegiance to blandness, mediocrity and predictability in people's goals, aspirations and experience of their existence. In minimising, if not removing, the foundational constituent of relatedness from our understanding of individuality, our relations – be they with self or others – have become all too commonly enmeshed in the objectifying strictures of 'I-It' encounters.

Relatedness: A Summary

I am who I am because of everyone. Orange Telecom 2008 Ad Campaign

Much of the difficulty in existential phenomenology's attempts to convey the Principle of relatedness stems from the limitations of language. As I have argued above, the English language, for example, immediately imposes a 'split' upon all discourse that seeks to express relatedness in a direct way. If I were to state, for instance, that you and I are both co-defined and co-active expressions of *being*, I would be attempting to communicate a key inter-relational axiom via the 'split' language of 'I' and 'you'. Such an attempt blunts and diminishes what is intended; in effect, it expresses relatedness via a language that, at best, obscures the inseparability that encompasses terms such as 'I' and 'you', 'us' and 'them'. Equally, attempts to create a novel way of expressing the relatedness underpinning these terms reveal that a major part of the problem is that what is being attempted is

a description and communication of *something* – be it ‘I’ or ‘you’. Instead, what relatedness posits is more akin to a *process*. Or, to put it another way, what is being pointed to is more *verb-like* than it is *noun-like*. In considering relatedness from a noun-like perspective, tensions and problems come into being that complicate an already confusing enterprise.

Once again, this confusion can be seen to have its parallel in the attempts to communicate various concepts and ideas from contemporary physics. Here, too, when the conclusions drawn from mathematical equations are communicated in terms of more everyday language, what emerges is a confusion of apparently distinct and contradictory statements which, nonetheless, are all held to be ‘true’. If we consider the many conceptual conundrums to do with time, space, locality and materiality thrown up by quantum physics it is both evident and somewhat startling to note how closely such conundrums resonate with those presented by the Principle of relatedness (Bohm & Hiley, 1995).

The terms we employ to grasp and express relatedness encase and restrain. They impose a passivity and/or closure upon a notion that yearns to communicate movement, openness and a perpetual ‘becoming’. In like fashion, the terms that existential phenomenologists have tended to apply, such as ‘being-in-the-world’ or ‘dasein’ or ‘figure/ground’, remove all sense of movement and indeterminacy, are too noun-like and remain too static for that which they seek to embrace. At the same time, terms like relatedness are also subject to being perceived from a separatist, noun-like standpoint. Relatedness is not either action or stasis, or either verb-like or noun-like; it is always ‘both/and’. Nonetheless, important distinctions arise when relatedness is viewed from each focus point. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, I have elected to employ the terms *worlding* and *worldview* as a means of more adequately expressing the human experience of existence both in general and as contrasting expressions of relatedness. For now, in spite of the limitations of language, I hope that something sufficient has been expressed regarding the existential phenomenological Principle of relatedness.

As a way of summarising the key concerns expressed by the Principle of relatedness, I want to put forward the South African notion of *ubuntu*. Ubuntu is a term open to multiple cultural interpretations (Gade, 2012). Nonetheless, a recurring theme embedded within the term challenges all views which address the person in isolation rather than from an inter-connected standpoint. Indeed, ubuntu suggests that we can only become human, and experience our humanity, when we no longer perceive of our selves as isolated individuals, separate and distinct from all others. According to Michael Onyebuchi Eze, ubuntu proposes that

humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am. The ‘I am’ is not a rigid subject, but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this otherness creation of relation and distance. (Eze, 2010: 190–191)

Through terms like ubuntu, we can better grasp the intended meaning of existential phenomenology's Principle of relatedness. Its implications reach out to challenge the dominance of an isolated and separatist subjectivity and remind us of a grounding through which the experience of existence includes all subjectivities.

An Exercise Exploring Existential Relatedness

1. Write five statements that convey something about who you are, or how you feel about your self or some other selected person or event, or what you did earlier today or intend to do later on.
 2. Examine the statements and note how noun-based they are.
 3. Following Kenneth Gergen's challenge, try to re-write your five statements so that all nouns are eliminated and, instead, what they attempt to convey is expressed only in a verb-like or action-focused language. Alternatively, try to communicate your five statements only via action – such as movement or dance. For example, try to convey a statement such as 'I will holiday in Italy this May' from an action-focused stance conveying 'I-ing' 'holidaying', 'Italy-ing' and 'May-ing'.
 4. Consider and explore your experience of shifting from noun-dominated statements to action-focused language. For instance, how, if at all, does it affect your sense of self? How, if at all, does it affect your connection to, or relationship with, the statements you have made and the persons or events or feelings and behaviours contained within them?
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The Second Principle: Uncertainty

Explanations exist; they have existed for all time; there is always a well-known solution to every human problem — neat, plausible, and wrong. H. L. Mencken

The second foundational Principle of existential phenomenology, *uncertainty*, arises as an immediate consequence of relatedness. Uncertainty expresses the inevitable and inescapable openness of possibility in any and all of our reflections upon our existence.

As was concluded with regard to the Principle of relatedness, our reflections upon existence, be they in general or having to do with 'my own' existence, can no longer be held *solely* by me or exist in some way exclusively 'within' me. Instead, relatedness exposes the many uncertainties that impinge upon every attempt at reflection. The Principle of uncertainty asserts that I can never fully determine with complete and final certainty or control not only *what* will present itself as stimulus to my experience, but also *how* I will experience and respond to stimuli. An immediate consequence of this stance is that even how I will experience my self under differing stimulus conditions cannot be predetermined.

Does this imply that existential phenomenology recognises no certainties whatsoever? Not at all. There exist any number of preconditions – including environmental and bio-chemical variables – that are required for the establishment and maintenance of life. Without them, no life is possible nor can be sustained. These are the certainties upon which life is able to come into, and continue, being. This second Principle concerns itself with those uncertainties that arise *within* the context of these preconditions. It argues that the person's lived experience within the certain preconditions of existence is constantly open to multiple possibilities – and hence remains uncertain. As Simone de Beauvoir reminds us, '[f]rom the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity' (de Beauvoir, 1986: 9). The Principle of uncertainty exemplifies this conclusion. At any moment, for example, all prior knowledge, values, assumptions and beliefs regarding self, others and the world in general may be open to challenge, reconsideration or dissolution in multiple ways that might surprise or disturb. Common statements such as 'I never thought I would act like that', or 'She seemed to turn into someone I didn't know', or 'World events have convinced me that I just can't make sense of things any longer' point us to positions that at least temporarily acknowledge the uncertainties of being. Social psychological studies on obedience to authority and social conformity provide powerful evidence of how easily we can think, feel and act in ways that we would never have predicted (Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 1969).

As a 'way in' to the further clarification of the Principle of uncertainty, let me first consider it from the standpoints of contemporary physics and from Isaiah Berlin's argument for value pluralism. Although approaching the question from a different perspective to that of existential phenomenology, I hope to demonstrate that their conclusions regarding uncertainty are not only compatible; they also serve to make the Principle more accessible.

Uncertainty in Contemporary Physics

We are all agreed that your theory is insane. The question that divides us is whether it is insane enough to have a chance of being correct. Neils Bohr to Wolfgang Pauli

I have long been fascinated by the temporal resonance between the development of existential phenomenology and the revolutionary changes taking place in Western physics. I have often wondered whether one body of thought impacted on the other in any way. Although I know of no historical research that has been carried out along such lines, I find it difficult to imagine that philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, who came from a background in mathematics, would have remained unaware of the radical theories being propounded by his scientific colleagues.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, theories of physics with regard to light assumed that light was best understood if viewed as a wave. Albert Einstein's

equations argued instead that light was a stream or 'packet' of energy particles, which he named quanta. Unlike waves, quanta have mass. This view was initially seen as being fantastical because light could not possibly have weight. Nonetheless, Einstein's hypothesis could not be disproven. However, although Einstein was correct in arguing that light was made up of quanta, older experiments which showed that light was also wave-like also continued to be verified. Depending upon the investigator's focus of observation, light could be simultaneously both a packet of energy (quanta) and a wave. Uncertainty in physics was established (Al-Khalili, 2009, 2012).

With the publication of Einstein's *Theory of Special Relativity* in 1905 (Einstein, 2001), the certainties of a mechanical and predictable universe began to be dismantled. Relativity theories argued that the one fixed constant – the speed of light – did not ever alter regardless of the conditions under which it was placed. However, the same could not be said of space and time. These now could be seen to be *relative*. For example, distance could no longer be understood as a relation between two points. Distance also involved the observer, whose relation to these two points directly affected the outcome of their measurement. Equally, intervals of time were seen to have no absolute value since the flow of time was demonstrated to be dependent on the relation between object and observer (Einstein et al., 2000).

Now, two competing and contradictory truths could co-exist. Uncertainty was introduced as a basic given of our relationship to the universe. The relativity of time and space was extended to become a relativity of knowledge. Whereas nineteenth-century physics had assumed that the more we understand, the more we can know with absolute certainty, twentieth-century physics began to reveal that the more we understand, what we can know becomes less predictably certain (Al-Khalili, 2009).

Contemporary dynamical systems theories of physics, such as Chaos Theory, are often misunderstood as arguing that the behaviour of complex systems is unpredictable. Instead, as was summarised by the theoretical physicist Jim Al-Khalili, what is actually being proposed is that: 'All the complexity of the universe emerges from mindless simple rules, rules repeated over and over again. But as powerful as this process is, it is also inherently unpredictable' (Al-Khalili, 2009). In other words, at the heart of all our certainties lies uncertainty. Whereas classical physics had assumed that unpredictable events were caused by some *external* interference upon a system that was otherwise coherent and predictable, dynamical systems theories have shown that this unpredictability is built into the system itself. And more, that it is this very same systemic unpredictability that generates what we experience as pattern and structure. Contemporary theories of physics view Order and Chaos, waves and matter, structure and process as interweaving paradoxical polarities (Al-Khalili, 2012).

Not being able to be certain should not, paradoxically, lead us to assume the certainty of uncertainty. From an either/or stance, I can claim that something is either certain or uncertain. If I declare it certain, then I am adopting a position of certainty. Equally, however, my opposite declaration of uncertainty is also rooted in

certainty in that I am now arguing that I am certain that something is uncertain. Both these claims can be seen to rely upon a foundational stance of certainty. In effect they are saying: ultimately all statements about either certainty or uncertainty are statements of certainty.

The existential phenomenological Principle of uncertainty, like dynamical systems theories in physics, proposes an alternative stance – that of *the uncertainty of uncertainty*. This stance treats both our claimed certainties as well as our claimed uncertainties as uncertain. In doing so, it seeks to emphasise the inseparable interweaving between certainty and uncertainty. Because of this inter-connectedness, no certainty (including the certainty of uncertainty) can ever be wholly certain; there can only be uncertain certainties and uncertain uncertainties.

Uncertainty: Isaiah Berlin's Value Pluralism

Uncertainty is a quality to be cherished, therefore – if not for it, who would dare to undertake anything? Villiers de L'Isle-Adam

Although it would be seriously misleading to suggest that he was an existential phenomenological philosopher, and he would almost certainly have been displeased to be so labelled, it is my view that, in his theory of *value pluralism*, Isaiah Berlin provides the most insightful analysis of several key implications arising from the Principle of uncertainty. Berlin's central argument criticised the general Western assumption that any theories or conclusions concerned with human values such as liberty, kindness, and equality could only be deemed to be true or correct if they revealed a coherence and consistency between all the various human values. If any conflicts or contradictions between values were identified, then the theory had to be wrong in some way. In his review of Berlin's posthumous book, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (Berlin, 2006), John Gray summarises this persistent assumption that

all genuine human values must be combinable in a harmonious whole. Conflicts of values are to be seen as symptoms of error that in principle can always be resolved: if human values seem to come into conflict that is only because our understanding of them is imperfect, or some of the contending values are spurious; and where such conflicts appear there is a single right answer that – if only they can find it – all reasonable people are bound to accept. (Gray, 2006: 20)

Berlin emphatically rejected all of these claims. Instead, his counter-argument to this view, which he rightly saw as having dominated Western intellectual tradition, asserted that, on the contrary, 'conflicts of values are real and inescapable, with some of them having no satisfactory solution [C]onflicts of value go with being human' (Gray, 2006: 20). From a political standpoint, Berlin contended, this

Enlightenment idea of an ideal and monistic harmony and perfection in human values generated the cataclysms of tyranny which had overshadowed his lifetime. For, at the heart of this idea lay ‘the intellectual roots of some of the major political disasters of the twentieth century’ (Gray, 2006: 20). When considering the excesses of political intolerance and curtailment of freedom of expression associated with both extreme right-wing and left-wing twentieth-century regimes, for example, Berlin’s view was that these were not explicable as errors in the application of a particular ideology, but, rather, were ‘the result of a resolute attempt to realize an Enlightenment utopia – a condition of society in which no serious conflict any longer exists’ (ibid.: 21).

The point being made by Berlin addresses the key concerns and assumptions to be found in the second Principle of existential phenomenology. Together, they ask us to embrace existence’s lack of completeness, and the inevitable failure of any attempt to complete it by realising all our possibilities (Cohn, 2002). Some critically minded therapists have arrived at very similar conclusions: In their text, *Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy*, Mick Cooper and John McLeod argue that both an existential therapy steeped in certainty as well as an existential therapy that is certain about its uncertainty is a contradiction in terms; existential uncertainty always holds open plural possibilities (Cooper & McLeod, 2011). In summarising Berlin’s value pluralism, John Cherniss provides a particularly revealing and relevant passage. He writes:

Man is incapable of self-completion, and therefore never wholly predictable; fallible, a complex combination of opposites, some reconcilable, others incapable of being resolved or harmonised; unable to cease from his search for truth, happiness, novelty, freedom, but with no guarantee . . . of being able to attain them. (Cherniss, 2006, quoted in Gray, 2006: 21)

This quote, it seems to me, provides us with a powerful summary of the Principle of existential uncertainty.

Existential Uncertainty: Implications

It is not certain that everything is uncertain. Blaise Pascal

All of us are likely to have had the experience of changing our view with regard to someone or some event. A close friend acts in a way that betrays my trust and brings the friendship to an end. I discover a new-found ability that alters the direction of my professional life. I watch a film that I initially thought to be a work of genius but which now seems superficial and pedestrian. If such obvious possibilities of uncertainty were all that this second Principle sought to highlight, then it would hardly be deserving of much attention. Surprising and unexpected events come upon us all at some time or other during our lives. However, rather than just being an occasional and temporary consequence of unusual circumstances, existential phenomenology

proposes that uncertainty remains a constant of existence. Shattering in its implications, this Principle remains initially counter-intuitive. Uncertainty expresses its presence not only in the surprising events in our lives, but just as equally and forcefully in the expected and (seemingly) fixed meanings and circumstances of everyday life. The existential phenomenological Principle of uncertainty urges us to treat each instance of 'the expected' as novel, full of previously unforeseen qualities and possibilities.

This 'both/and' way of considering the implications of the Principle of uncertainty is not always sufficiently addressed by existential therapists. Yet it offers potentially valuable insights. For example, this view of uncertainty suggests that a couple's experience of sexual boredom within their relationship is not directly due to the rigidity of habitual behaviour, but rather to the degree to which they have detached themselves from experiencing the uncertainty that exists within the rigid conditions being maintained. Television 'lifestyle' experts or newspaper agony aunts, for instance, forever suggest novel positions or activities as ways of 'spicing up' a couple's moribund sexual life. In taking this stance, they fail to consider how it is that any number of other couples may be happily satisfied with, and require no 'spicing up' of, their sexual relations, even though what they do and how and when they do it might be characterised as being habitual and predictable. Equally, such pundits avoid alerting their audience to the likelihood that even the suggested novel position or activity may all too rapidly come to be experienced as tedious and bland. What such examples make plain is that the experience of pleasurable excitement in one's sexual relations, or the lack of it, has little to do with matters of novelty or habit, but rather reveals the consequences of an openness toward, or an avoidance of, the uncertainty that exists at all times and is expressed in all actions. In sum, uncertainty reminds us that every reflectively structured pattern of certainty nonetheless is grounded in uncertainty.

In general, Western culture perhaps overvalues the comfort of certainty and underestimates the benefits of uncertainty. We assume a 'naturalness' to the former and impose a sense of the unusual or the unwanted in the latter. We tell our selves that it is better to act as though we were certain of our selves or some viewpoint rather than reveal our selves to be uncertain. Certainty is strength; uncertainty weakens us. In contrast to this, consider the following existential alternatives:

Most days, when either I or my wife leave our home on our own, we embrace one another at the doorway and say something like, 'See you, later.' Our statements are full of certainty. There will certainly be a 'later' during which we will see one another. However, were we to acknowledge the impact of existential uncertainty, what we would have to say to one another, at best, would be, 'Hopefully, we'll see one another again'. At first, this latter statement strikes us as being decidedly odd, perhaps even ghoulish. But consider it this way: If we truly accepted its implications, and placed uncertainty upon our desire and hope to meet again, then might it not be likely that our embrace, our potentially temporary but also potentially permanent 'goodbye' to one another would be imbued with a value, a quality, a fervour that would be far less likely to exist in that 'goodbye' which assumes there will be many other future 'goodbye's and 'hello's to come? The 'goodbye'

that assumes a future 'hello' permits me to put off until another time that which I might want to express or will punish my self for not expressing if, unexpectedly, no further opportunities become possible.

A client of mine, Sharon, came to see me because she was so upset by her mother's worsening of dementia and the effect it was having upon their relationship. Sharon's mother had been in a Home for some eight months and Sharon had arranged her life in such a way that she could visit her three times a week. However, as the impact of the dementia increased, Sharon was finding it more and more difficult to force her self to visit her mother. She explained to me that their encounters had become increasingly painful because her mother now rarely recognised Sharon and when told by her that they were mother and daughter, rejected such statements as nonsense. Sharon's insistence as to their relationship only succeeded in generating ever increasing levels of disturbance for her mother such that she became verbally abusive towards Sharon and demanded that she leave. Sharon felt deeply guilty about her increasing lack of desire to visit her mother as well as her growing anger towards her. During therapy, we addressed these feelings and, as well, Sharon's expectations and feelings of loss. Though still alive, her mother had begun to feel relationally dead to Sharon and several times, breaking down in fits of anger and shame, she expressed the wish that her mother would now die physically as well as relationally. The breakthrough came for Sharon when, on one of her visits, having given up all hope, she approached her mother as a stranger. No longer able to be mother and daughter, they were now two people meeting for the first time and attempting to engage with one another. Much to Sharon's amazement, their discussion soon turned to the topic of their children and Sharon heard her mother talk lovingly and with great accuracy about her daughter, who, quite by coincidence, was also named Sharon. Having given up her insistence that she be seen as her mother's daughter, Sharon had found a way to experience that mutually significant and deeply felt mother–daughter relationship for which she had longed.

As readers can ascertain, the first example challenges us to embrace the uncertain in that which we have made certain. The second example alerts us as to how we can limit the possibilities of uncertain circumstances when we insist upon imposing a preferred, but unavailable, certainty upon them.

An Exercise Exploring Uncertainty

Ask your self the following questions:

1. What is one thing, (a), about me that I feel truly certain about?
2. What is one thing, (b), about me that I feel truly uncertain about?
3. What is my felt experience of each? What is the same about (a) and (b)? What is different about them?

(Continued)

(Continued)

4. What would happen if I became uncertain about (a)?
5. What would happen if I became certain of (b)?
6. What is my felt experience of (a) having become uncertain? What is my felt experience of (b) having become certain? What is the same about these new experiences of (a) and (b)? What is different about them?

The Third Principle: Existential Anxiety

Freedom's possibility announces itself in anxiety. Søren Kierkegaard

The Principle of existential anxiety follows as a direct consequence of the first two Principles in that it expresses *the lived experience of relational uncertainty*. It is necessary to note from the outset, however, that existential anxiety is not only an expression of disabling and unwanted levels of unease, nervousness, worry and stress. The Principle of existential anxiety certainly *includes* these disturbances and disorders, but it seeks to convey a much more generally felt experience of incompleteness and perpetual potentiality which is expressive of an inherent openness to the unknown possibilities of life experience. In its wider scope, existential anxiety can be both exhilarating and debilitating, a spur to risk-taking action as well as stimulus to fear-fuelled paralysis. Because of this wider meaning, and as well in their attempt to avoid confusion with more restricted, clinically derived definitions of anxiety, some existential phenomenologists prefer to employ the term *angst* (Langdridge, 2013). Acknowledging the possible debates and confusions in definition that can be provoked, nonetheless my own preference is to retain the more widely accessible term.

What is pivotal about the notion of existential anxiety is that it is to be seen as an inevitable 'given' of our lived experience of being human. The notion of homeostasis serves as a useful analogue of existential anxiety. Homeostasis refers to the body's attempt to maintain a state or condition of equilibrium or balanced stability. This attempt remains just that – an attempt rather than an achievement. Stimuli from within and external to the organism prevent homeostasis from being a permanent accomplishment. As a condition of life, the body is in a perpetual state of dis-equilibrium endeavouring to achieve permanent balance. Although the body is continually frustrated in its attempts to achieve the perpetual stability of homeostasis, it is nonetheless this very same failure that stimulates the organism to act and to experience. As with the Principle of existential anxiety, it would be misleading to view homeostatic dis-equilibrium solely as a disorder. Instead, both existential anxiety and homeostatic dis-equilibrium serve as stimuli towards strategies whose intent is that of balance.

The dilemma of existential anxiety is not so much *that* it is, but rather *how* each of us 'lives with' it. Existential anxiety encompasses *all* responses to the relational

uncertainties of existence. Anxiety may, and often does, arouse feelings of despair, confusion and bewilderment. But the experience of anxiety can also be stimulating, can re-awaken or enhance our connectedness to being alive, and elicits creativity. In not only responding to the challenges of life, but, as well, in provoking challenge through such felt experiences as curiosity, desire, hope, and care we welcome the anxiety that accompanies all these experiences because of its ability to 'awaken' and stimulate us.

The Principle of existential anxiety also alerts us to the disturbing realisation that whatever the stance we adopt towards anxiety, it cannot be removed from our experience of existence. If I embrace anxiety, anxiety remains. Equally, my attempts to resist, reject or deny anxiety typically generate anxiety as expressed, for example, through rigid and restrictive patterns of thought and behaviour or, conversely, as persistent demands and quests for the unknown and novel. What both these stances reveal is a shared rigidity and inflexibility of attitude and stance. Commonly expressed in terms such as obsessive or compulsive behaviours, phobias and addictive disorders these instances of unease reveal themselves as *anxieties about anxiety*. As will be discussed in Part Two, existential therapy can confront us with our attempts to evade and escape anxiety and the anxiety-riddled consequences that can result from this. In important ways, rather than propose or provide the means to reduce or eradicate anxiety from our lives, as is often offered by other models of therapy, existential therapy challenges us to reconsider our anxiety-evasive strategies, weigh up more accurately what their 'price' is and what consequences they generate, and to assess what alternate 'price' there might be in attempting stances that are more open to meeting or engaging with existential anxiety. At the same time, we should not delude our selves into supposing that by facing up to our attempts to avoid or deny existential anxiety we somehow manage to surmount it or disengage our being from it. Whichever stance we take, it will be imbued with existential anxiety. There is 'no way out'.

An Exercise Exploring Existential Anxiety

1. Identify one recurring anxiety that you experience.
 2. What is it about this anxiety that is problematic for you?
 3. What would change in or about your life if you no longer felt this anxiety?
 4. What would change in your life if the anxiety intensified?
 5. How does your anxiety affect or impact upon your relations with others? Or a particular other?
 6. When you consider your anxiety as an example of the attempt to evade existential anxiety what, if anything, is further clarified about your anxiety?
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The Three Principles: A Summary

Our own life is the instrument with which we experiment with the truth.
Thich Nhat Hanh

Existential phenomenology argues that Western thought and reflections upon our existence, especially since Descartes, have seen human existence in a dualistic mode. Self/other, subject/object, inner/outer, thought/emotion are examples of our particularly separatist Western way of dualistic reflection. This way of reflecting has allowed us to construe *being* as 'boundaried' or 'bounded' and individualistically/subjectively dominated rather than relationally attuned. In contrast, I have argued that, through its foundational Principles of relatedness, uncertainty and existential anxiety, existential phenomenology can present a view of existence which rests upon the attempt to 'hold the tension' between apparently contrasting, separate and contradictory concerns so that they can be reflectively experienced as co-existent and inter-dependent unifying polarities.

Existential therapists have often claimed that this approach, or their particular interpretation of it, is radical (Langdridge, 2013; van Deurzen & Adams, 2011; van Deurzen-Smith, 1988). In my view, such claims are weakened because of the centrality of focus given to various thematic existence concerns without first placing these within the specific context of existential phenomenology's underlying Principles. In not doing so, I believe that existential therapy's specific 'take' or perspective on these broad themes, which in various ways all models of therapy address, often remains unclear and difficult to separate from the perspectives of other models. Further, in emphasising the thematic concerns without contextualising them within existential phenomenology's Principles, the novel possibilities regarding the *practice* of existential therapy remain obscure such that it is often difficult to discern what there is about practising existential therapy that is different, distinctive or, indeed, radical.

I think that such claims can be made valid by reconfiguring existential therapy so that what it says and does is far more clearly aligned with its foundational Principles. As a starting point to this argument, the present chapter has sought to summarise three key foundational Principles of existential phenomenology – relatedness, uncertainty and existential anxiety. It is my view that these three Principles are *necessary* to any adequate explication of existential phenomenological theory. That they may be *sufficient* as well as necessary remains debatable. My own view is that these three conditions are sufficient in so far as they provide the most basic 'sketch' or 'ground-plan' of the existential phenomenological terrain as delineated by its foundational philosophical contributors – Edmund Husserl (1965, 1977, 2012), Martin Heidegger (1962, 1976, 2001) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1973, 1985, 1991). This is not to suggest that the contributions of these three philosophers, much less those of pivotal thinkers such as Martin Buber (1970, 2002), George Gadamer (2004), Karl Jaspers (1963), Immanuel Levinas (1987, 1999) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964a, 1964b), among numerous others, can simply be *reduced* to these three

Principles. Nor is it being suggested that anyone claiming to espouse existential phenomenology is no longer required to grapple intellectually with many, if not all, of these philosophers (and any number of others left unmentioned).

What *is* being proposed is that in considering these three Principles as pivotal constituents, a great deal of the confusion and dividedness regarding what existential phenomenology proposes, what its implications for therapy might be and how an existential therapy that exists in contrast and comparison to other approaches to therapy would be substantially reduced. For one thing, it would become clearer that it is not so much *that* it is philosophically based, but rather *what* philosophical Principles it upholds that makes it distinctive. Second, the diversity between existential approaches which arises through the differing emphases and interpretations given to thematic existence concerns can be considered within the context of these foundational Principles. Third, a genuine distinction could be made between those philosophers and theorists who address existence themes from a wide range of perspectives (often in highly pertinent and significant ways) and those whose exploratory perspective on such themes is derived from existential phenomenological Principles. For example, as was discussed with regard to the Principle of uncertainty, Isaiah Berlin's writing on value pluralism has much to say that illuminates various thematic existence concerns such as meaning and authenticity. At the same time, claims that Berlin's arguments reveal him to be an existential phenomenological thinker would be absurd and degrading of his achievements. Personally, acknowledging its potentially divisive danger, I would argue that the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche provoke a similar conclusion. A great many of the thematic existence concerns that inform Nietzsche's writings are of vast significance to existential phenomenological thought and practice and help to elucidate its specific stance regarding such themes. But to argue that Nietzsche's contributions to psychoanalytic thought are not at least as significant would be, I think, misguided.

But let me be clear – I am making no claim that a single, all-encompassing approach to existential therapy must exist, or more, that the interpretation being presented in this text *is* that approach. In keeping with the focus of this chapter, I want to emphasise the openness and uncertainty that are characteristic of existential therapy. At the same time, it would be pointless to claim that anything can be existential therapy without also claiming that whatever that 'anything' might be was in some way contained and contextualised within certain conditions. In my view, these conditions are best understood as foundational Principles, which I have attempted to identify and clarify. That these may stimulate further clarification or other contrasting ways of thinking is about the best any author can hope for.

Having provided an introductory overview centred upon these Principles, it is now possible to consider those thematic existence concerns most closely associated with existential phenomenology – concerns surrounding meaning and meaninglessness, choice, freedom and responsibility, authenticity and inauthenticity, isolation and relation, death anxiety, temporality and spatiality – so that an existential phenomenological perspective on them can be argued.