

EXISTENTIALISM AND DISABILITY

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Existentialism has the potentiality for revitalizing psychology much as Einstein's theory of relativity revitalized physics. There is a significant difference, however, in the origins of these revitalizing influences. In the case of relativity, the attitude or posture of physics was such that revolutionary developments could occur within the discipline itself. In the case of psychology, this has not been the case. Existentialism developed mainly outside of psychology. It has developed because psychology has failed to face the essential problem of psychology, i. e., the nature of man as a psychological being, rather than a biological organism. In its desire to become a science patterned after physics and chemistry, psychology has abdicated its unique and essential realm and has restricted itself to a limited area where it could emulate the methods of the sciences dealing with objects. It has thus neglected the study of the psychological processes of experiencing human beings. As a result, psychologists have, with some recent exceptions (which some traditional psychologists--who call themselves experimental psychologists--would like to read out of the profession), retreated from concern with psychological problems. Psychology has rejected the soul and the spiritual, to concentrate upon the body, the organism, psychophysics, and behavior in the narrow sense of the term.

It is thus a reflection on psychology that concern about existence, meaning, values, awareness, the experience of freedom and choice, and responsibility has not been a central aspect of psychology, but has essentially arisen outside of psychology. These would certainly appear to be psychological concerns. Since, however, they have not been claimed by or included in psychology, we have the situation where Frankl, for example, considers them to be outside of or beyond psychology and assigns them to another realm, the realm of the spiritual. If psychology had been attending to its essential business, this should not have occurred. Hopefully, with the increasing interest of psychologists in existentialism, psychology will regain its soul, and eventually reach the point where it will be existentially oriented so that existential will not be a necessary modifier to apply to psychology.

The contribution of existentialism to psychology may be illustrated by a consideration of the problem of disability. There has been much said and written about the psychology of disability. Little is helpful or of value to the person who is disabled, however, or even useful to the non-disabled person in relating to the disabled individual. Psychology has taken an external approach, and has not faced the problem of the meaning of disability in life and to the disabled person. The disabled are urged to accept their disabilities, to take a realistic attitude toward them, to avoid resignation and dependency on the one hand and unrealistic ignoring or denial and overcompensation on the other. But how is this to be done? What has psychology to offer to the disabled, to a Ted Kennedy suddenly faced with the unknown consequences of a serious accident? Religion is often suggested as a resource in such cases. But should not psychology be expected to have something to contribute?

Psychology, as Bugental (1, p. 25) points out, has avoided concern with tragedy. "It is a word unfamiliar to much of American psychology," he says, "a word we are more accustomed to in association with literature, but it is a word that needs to be reincorporated into our psychological thinking.... Tragedy is a part of living. Tragedy must be incorporated into our recognition of reality. "It is well, and perhaps fortunate, that writers and poets have dealt with tragedy and have provided some help to those who must deal with it. But is it not also an obligation of psychology to concern itself with this ubiquitous and inevitable aspect of life?"

Existentialism faces up to tragedy. Bugental writes:

"The existential view is that tragedy is very much a part of our being in the world, that it is one expression of the significance of our being, and that the denial of tragedy means the debasement of our being. Tragedy says that what we do matters, that our choices make a difference, that living is truly a life-and-death matter. The fully aware person can no more deny tragedy than he can deny gravitation" (1, p. 151).

That existentialism recognizes tragedy is probably well known. But it seems to be generally assumed that this is as far as it goes. Existentialism is generally seen as being pessimistic, advocating abject acceptance of and resignation to tragedy. If this is all that existentialism offered, it would be of little psychological value.

But existentialism goes beyond this. First, it brings to our attention that without tragedy, life would lack meaning. Rather than asking what is the meaning of tragedy, it points out that tragedy gives meaning to the rest of life. Joy has no meaning except in comparison with, or in contrast to, tragedy. Gibran in *The Prophet* (3, pp. 29-30) expressed it poetically:

Then a woman said, Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow.
And he answered
Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.
And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was often
filled with your tears.
And how else can it be?
The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you
can contain....
Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say,
"Nay, sorrow is the greater";
But I say unto you, these are inseparable.

The second contribution of existentialism to tragedy is perhaps best developed by Frankl (2). Frankl distinguishes three kinds of values. The first, creative values, consists of those which are realized in creative action. The second are experiential values, and are realized in experience, such as the experiencing of the good, the true and the beautiful in the arts, literature and nature. The third category of values Frankl calls attitudinal. They are expressed in man's responses to the restraints--or tragedies--which are part of his existence. "What is significant is the person's attitude toward an unalterable fate.... The way in which he accepts, the way in which he bears his

cross, what courage he manifests in suffering, what dignity he displays in doom and disaster, is the measure of his human fulfillment" (2, p. 50).

Man's fate or destiny consists of those happenings or conditions which life imposes upon him and which he can do nothing about. It does not include those things which he can change. Attitudinal values cannot be realized by acceptance or resignation to what is not inevitable. Destiny is to be shaped where possible, but where not possible, it is to be used for the realization of attitudinal values, to make something of one's life in the face of inevitable fate.

To consider oneself as helpless in the face of fate and tragedy is to relinquish responsibility for oneself and one's attitudes. If destiny or fate cannot be controlled or influenced, man can determine his attitude toward it. One is not responsible for fate or destiny, but he is responsible for how he reacts to it. Man realizes attitudinal values by his attitude toward his destined or inescapable suffering; he gives meaning to his life by the way he faces tragedy and fate.

Disability is fate; it is one of the tragedies of life. One has no control over, and therefore no responsibility for, the existence of a disability, but one does have control over, and thus responsibility for, one's attitude toward it. Disability is thus like other tragedies with which life faces us. It is one of the conditions of life, one of the tasks with which life faces us, and thus one of the opportunities for giving meaning to life. How it is used is up to the individual. As one client phrased it: "It's like being in prison. You can either make the most of it or pine away. In a way, my wheelchair is my prison." Then, after a long pause: "I'm having trouble accepting that." And later: "I have realized that I must look to myself."

Disability is a limitation. It is a limitation upon the freedom which existentialism emphasizes as one of the major characteristics of existence. But freedom is not an absolute; it is always limited. If there were no limits, there would be no freedom. Freedom is not experienced unless there is lack of freedom, or limits. Awareness of limits is necessary for the existence of freedom. No one is completely free; restricting conditions impinge upon all of us. But it is the awareness of these restrictions which gives awareness of freedom. The recognition of limitations leads to recognition and appreciation of the freedom which does exist. Recognition of limitations makes it possible to deal with them, and, perhaps, to some extent at least, to transcend them rather than succumb to them.

So disability, like many other conditions which surround us, limits freedom, but it does not eliminate it. It does introduce the necessity of new and different choices, which involve either the further limiting of freedom, or extending it to its limits. Acceptance of disability often seems to mean acceptance of limitations which may not necessarily be inherent in the disability. They may be imposed by the individual or by society. The disabled person may unnecessarily limit his freedom. And in doing so, he may deny any responsibility. But even if he is so disabled that he has little if any freedom in the usual activities of life, that is, little if any opportunity to realize creative or experiential values, he is still free in the attitude he takes toward his disability, and thus is responsible for his attitudes. If nothing else, the individual has freedom in determining his attitude toward his disability. Existentialism emphasizes that, regardless of fate and destiny, suffering and limitations, each of us has some freedom and is thus responsible for what he does with his life.

Disability, misfortunes, suffering, and pain present opportunities, in the sense that they make us more appreciative of the opportunities which exist within the limitations which they impose on us. They are also a potential stimulus to accomplish the most that can be accomplished within the limitations, and to utilize otherwise untapped resources and potential. It is through achievements in meeting life's tasks in the face of disability and limitations that life acquires meaning.

What gives most meaning to life in the face of a disability? Passive resignation, dependency, sense of martyrdom, the repudiation of responsibility? Or bitter struggle, denial, anger at fate, or a forced extraversion, cheerfulness, striving for complete independence, a "we shall overcome" attitude? Each of these is considered desirable by some, both the disabled and able-bodied. Thus the disabled and those who relate to them are uncertain how to behave or act toward each other, with resulting discomfort in the relationship.

But if disability is seen as one of the many conditions which fate or destiny imposes upon us, then perhaps there can be some common agreement on attitudes toward disability by both the disabled and the able bodied. Conditions limit but do not completely determine. They are not absolute but are affected by one's perceptions and attitudes. Thus they are handicaps and limitations but do not take away human responsibility. One is responsible for living one's life in the face of fate and tragedy. This is the opportunity which life gives all of us. Satisfaction, joy, self-actualization, fulfillment come only from surmounting obstacles, enduring trials and suffering, utilizing them as opportunities for growth and development.

And a woman spoke, saying, Tell us of Pain
And he said:
Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your
understanding
Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand
in the sun,
so you must know pain (3, p. 60).

REFERENCES

1. Bugental, J. F. T. *The search for authenticity: an existential-analytic approach to psychotherapy*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965.
2. Frankl, V. V. *The doctor and the soul*. New York: Knopf, 1955.
3. Gibran, K. *The Prophet*. New York: Knopf, 1923.