

AUTHENTIC HISTORICALNESS: MAKING OUR HISTORY OUR OWN

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Abstract

This article is based on a paper presented during the 3rd World Congress for Existential Therapy held in Athens in May 2023. The title was inspired by the work of Martin Heidegger and his concept “authentic historicalness”, as presented in an article by, Thomas Sheehan and Corinne Painter (1999).

The paradox of thrownness and freedom is one that troubled me for many years. How can we claim that we are free and responsible for our life since so many of our conditions are not of our choosing? The idea that our freedom lies in our ability to choose our fate by embracing our history and making it our own seems to be an important answer to my quest.

Introduction

Since I was a teenager my most important and valuable desire was to be free. I disliked psychoanalysis and behaviorism because of their deterministic outlook on life and that was the primary reason that led me to embrace the third movement of psychology, that is the humanistic theories. During my doctoral studies I became acquainted with existential theories, and I felt I found my homeplace. At the time I was also working on a synthesis of developmental theories in an effort to understand myself and what was “truly mine”. In my early twenties I had this naïve thought that maybe I could figure out my “authentic self” as something uniquely mine that was not the result of my biology, as Freud suggested, or of my environment, as Skinner and the behaviorists proposed.

In this process of understanding myself through the synthesis of different theories, I developed the idea of a psychological or psychic DNA, that I called “the DNA of the Soul”. It was first presented in 2002 in the 3rd World Congress for Psychotherapy in Vienna, Austria, and it was later published in Greek (Georganda, 2002). This synthesis of theories (Georganda, 2007), is symbolized by the DNA molecule for several reasons. First, it implies the ingrained nature of our lived experiences that are “engraved in our skin”; secondly, the double helix is a representation of the dual and spiral form of growth from birth to death;

finally, the little molecules in between seem to represent each step in the process of our development. Influenced by Erikson's psychosocial stages of development (1963, 1980), where Erikson describes a positive and negative outcome for each era, I saw the two strands as forming the two poles that represent this "positive and negative" outcome. I now understand these outcomes as life-enhancing or life restricting, a more open or a more closed, form of living.

These two poles can also be viewed as a representation of the paradoxical nature of our life. We are constantly faced with dilemmas that can never be fully resolved but only temporarily appeased. I call these dilemmas "dialectical tensions" (Georganda, 2022). This is a concept that could be, in existential terms, the equivalent of the psychodynamic idea of "inner conflict". It is these tensions that often cause anxiety and are continuously troubling us. This continuous tension and negotiation often make us feel that we are again and again struggling with the same issues and questions as if we have made no progress. However, my personal and professional experience tells me that this re-negotiation is every time on a different level depending on our age and awareness. This is what led to the idea of the spiral movement instead of a linear progression. Some of the dilemmas that we are faced with are those of: Me-Other, Freedom-Security, Autonomy-Connectedness, Self-esteem-Self-doubt and shame. These dilemmas form a continuum from one extreme to the other where there can be no absolute freedom or security, autonomy or connectedness, self-esteem or self-doubt. Furthermore, it seems that all these dialectical tensions are interrelated. When, for example, we feel competent and have a good sense of ourselves we feel safer to make choices that are more personal (authentic), rather than out of fear and insecurity to follow what is dictated by others and our social environment (Das Man). Thus, the question always remains open as to where we stand towards these dilemmas and how we choose to respond to our changing circumstances.

When thinking developmentally about our life story we can say that there are two main elements that influence significantly the way we are and relate to others in later life: attachment and separation. The kind of attachment pattern (Bowlby, 1973) that we have experienced in early life, as well as the way in which this initial bond (Mahler, 1975) is negotiated as the infant is slowly maturing and becoming a separate and autonomous entity are both very important for our life and the way we are with others. The absence of love and affection in early life affects our psychological, emotional, biochemical and neurobiological makeup. As we develop, we become increasingly more autonomous and able to stand on our own. This ability to "stand-out" as separate and responsible beings is a process that begins early on and is related to the ability of the mother, or primary

caregiver, to slowly let go of the initial bond and to encourage steps towards greater independence.

Erikson (1973, 1980) suggests that the successful outcome of the first year, where a secure attachment leads to the development of trust, the baby acquires the virtue of hope. Similarly, in the second year the successful outcome leads to the development of autonomy instead of feelings of doubt and shame, resulting in the virtue of will. Will is vital for taking responsibility for our life and having the existential courage to face life and life's dilemmas. Furthermore, the feelings of competency and industry developed during childhood enhance our self-esteem and assist us in the formation of our identity. Later, our ability to form intimate relationships, to care for others, and to give and produce, help us face up to the meaninglessness of life and the difficulties of old age and decay. To live a fulfilled and satisfying life is the best antidote to our fear of death. Being able to face the ultimate end with a sense of contentment for a life well lived, I believe, is the only reward we can hope for in our struggles.

Towards an understanding of the paradox of Thrownness and Freedom.

Existential psychotherapy is concerned with both ontological and ontic givens. Ontology is the study of being. It is the branch of philosophy that investigates the nature of existence, the features all entities have in common. Ontological theories in psychology are concerned with the study of what it means to be a human being. Daseinanalysis and phenomenological theories are the most ontological, taking into consideration the common characteristics (existentials) of human beings. What are the ontological givens that characterize all human beings at all times? Being in time, in space, in a body, in a mood, being-towards-death, being-in-the-world, thrownness, finitude, authenticity, just to name a few. These conditions have also an ontic, a personal dimension. Each one of us is also thrown into a specific set of circumstances that are unique for each. We have a specific biological DNA and a psychic one, as defined above. We are not only born in a specific body but also in a specific family, culture, society, era that form specific conditions of maturation and development.

These ontological and ontic givens comprise our life story. We are immersed in a specific set of circumstances as Ernesto Spinelli (2007) so aptly describes:

“Existential phenomenology, contrary to popular assumptions, insists that human beings are not always free to choose. There exist conditions of being where no choice presents itself. Primary among these is our thrownness. None of us had the choice in coming into existence. Rather, each of us was ‘thrown into’ being. Similarly, none of us will have any

choice in the fact that we will be, at some certain, if indeterminate, point in time, 'thrown out' of existence, in that we will cease to be as a human being. Furthermore, we are also 'thrown' into a particular body, a particular time, culture, set of prevailing attitudes, mores, stances & opinions. These too are beyond choice as are the infinity of stimuli or events 'thrown up' by the world to which we must respond. Thus, such choices as may exist are always situated in a set of 'thrown' conditions, whose presence can neither be chosen nor truly controlled." (p.45)

Since so many of our life circumstances are beyond our control the question that always puzzled me was where our freedom is. Are we free or is it just an illusion? However, if we are not free where is our responsibility and how can we claim that we are our choices, as Sartre proclaims?

In an initial attempt to address this paradox of thrownness and freedom I presented a paper during the 1st World Congress for Existential Therapy held in London in 2015 that was later published in 2016¹. In this article I discuss the importance of awareness of our thrownness, that is often part of the psychotherapeutic process, and the role of will power. An increased awareness of the conditions in which we are situated and have been brought up in can help us make more conscious choices and change our worldview so that it can really match more closely how we experience the world and others as grown-up and conscious beings. Rather than rely on old patterns and incorporated values and beliefs from our social, cultural, religious environment we can be more flexible to view alternative ways of being and thus increase the range of our choices and open-up to new possibilities. Of course, as we all know, changing old ways and habitual manners is a process that requires a continuous effort, since no change can happen miraculously. This is where I thought that the role of will and will power plays an important role in becoming more "authentic"

As Emmy Van Deurzen & Martin Adams (2011) write,

"Existential meaning of authenticity is in the first four letters 'auth' as in authorship. It refers to how much a person is able to be open to existence, anticipate its truth, oversee its difficulties and take responsibility for the consequences of their choices. Authenticity cannot be standardized or normalized. What makes an action authentic is whether it is chosen and owned in full knowledge of the situation and the potential consequences. Authentic living is aware living." (p. 92)

¹ Georganda, E. (2016). Thrownness, Freedom and the Will for Authenticity: An Existential – Developmental Approach to Psychotherapy. *Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis* 27(2): 261-276.

Although this seemed to be an important answer to my quest that was also congruent with what I liked from Victor Frankl's (1963) account of his experience in the concentration camp, that we are free to choose our stance towards our circumstances no matter what these are, I still felt that this was not a sufficient answer. Are our choices and the stance we take in life and towards circumstances not affected by our lived experiences? Can we be other than who we are and have become from these experiences? Nietzsche's (1954) dictums "Be who you are" and *Amor Fati* ("love of fate") are resonating in my mind and heart and seek a reply.

Authentic Historicalness as a possible answer to the paradox.

I came across the term "authentic historicalness" while reading an article by Thomas Sheehan and Corinne Painter (1999)². Both the title of the article and the term authentic historicalness captured my attention. Maybe this is the answer to my quest, I thought. I continued reading: "Openness (dasein/being), in its specificity, always has its "history," and can have it, because the very being of this entity is constituted by historicalness" (p. 64). Exactly, I thought, we are our history and can never escape from it. Our history and our lived experiences are who we are. We are who we are as a result of our experiences and our interaction with the world and with others from day one.

Furthermore, "Thrownness provides the possibilities from which one chooses." (p. 65) "Resolution [which means (1) accepting oneself as mortal and (2) living authentically in one's specific situation] frees up concrete possibilities inherited through thrownness" (p.66). "Authentic historicalness lets one live authentically within history and is "choosing one's fate." (p. 75) Sheehan and Painter continue: "Authentic historicalness emphasizes the already-open. But how is resolution connected with a complete lifespan? Indeed, what constitutes a lifespan?" (p. 78). This question was what prompted me to integrate this synthesis of developmental theories that describe our growth throughout our life span with the concept of "authentic historicalness". Finally, this notion of embracing our history and making it our own as an answer to where our freedom lies made sense.

Embracing our history and making it our own is a possible way of understanding how thrownness and freedom can co-habit and make sense as two ways of being that exist simultaneously. This may be why Heidegger refers to Antigone of

² Sheehan, T. and Painter, C. (1999). Choosing One's Fate: A Re-reading of Sein und Zeit (section) 74. *Research in Phenomenology* 29: 63-82.

Sophocles (1999) as an example of authenticity. Although Antigone is following the norms and dictates of her culture at the same time, she is willing to sacrifice her life and go against the will of her uncle, the King, because this is what she really believes and has embraced as her values and morals. She has the courage to stand up for what she believes is right for her brother while also honoring the traditions of her culture. However, making our history our own is not an easy endeavor. How can we make peace with our history, especially when it is traumatic? Very often the individuals we see in therapy have suffered significant losses and their lived experiences are full of pain and sorrow.

Bessel van der Kolk (2015) in his very influential book “The Body Keeps the Score”, refers to the importance of developmental trauma and how it is different from other forms of trauma. Later trauma that may happen because of crises, accidents, natural disasters, or war may be more easily addressed than early trauma. Apparently, from what we now know about the importance of early life for the development of the brain and of neural pathways, as well as for affective self-regulation from the autonomic nervous system, abuse or neglect may cause serious damage to functioning. Attachment and affect regulation theories (Georganda, 2019) need to be taken into consideration when we are talking about psychotherapy and the healing process. Sometimes talking therapy is not sufficient by itself to help the individual deal with serious trauma. I would also like to note, from my 40 years of professional experience, that a significant number of the individuals who seek therapy suffer from more insidious forms of trauma. The more obvious physical, sexual abuse or neglect can be easily detected and identified as trauma. The resentful, critical, disdainful, rejecting and demeaning or even the extreme overprotective attitudes of significant others may be harder to identify, yet may cause significant damage to one’s self-concept and self-esteem.

Final remarks

Although embracing our history and making it our own is not an easy task, making peace with our life story can be an important psychotherapeutic outcome. Since our life story cannot change, acceptance and reconciliation with our past is the most we can hope for. The process of psychotherapy, as I understand it, involves the creation of a safe space and time in which one can slowly unravel their life story. The presence of another caring, open and non-judgmental person can facilitate this process of unraveling, describing and shedding light on lived experiences. Especially important is the emotional and affective remembering of our life story. Often people in therapy will relate their life story from the first session. All the information may be available from early

on. However, this is not sufficient for the deeper healing process of coming to terms with what this story means on an emotional level.

The reason why therapy takes a rather long time is because the process of getting in touch with our truth as it has really affected us is often painful and disquieting. It unavoidably leads us to changing our worldview and our sedimented ideas (Spinelli, 2007). Facing our demons and all that we have tried to put aside to deal with the pain involved leads to a turbulent time. Sometimes, as a woman I see in therapy describes, “opening up the black box” that contains our secrets, and our painful memories can take significant courage. Revealing the ugly truth and dealing with it requires steady support and trust in the process and the relationship. Often a basic question is whether we, as therapists, are ready to hold the pain, the sorrow and the despair of the person in therapy. Practicing existential psychotherapy is often a taxing and demanding process for the therapist as well as for the person in therapy.

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