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Responsibility in Existential Approach of Psychotherapy

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show that responsibility arises from an existential dimension of the human being and therefore an existential depth is a necessary condition of undertaking or rejecting responsibility. Linking ethical and existential dimensions has an application in the process of psychotherapy, beginning with M. Boss, to I.D. Yalom. Both of them applied the philosophical issues of M. Heidegger's thought. Yalom isolated the area of problems and medical conditions, and put forward a thesis that they arise from the existential depth of Dasein; thus, assuming or escaping responsibility brings consequences for mental health. Following such indications, one may find oneself on a ground of one's own responsibility. In this paper, it will be shown that if one deals with existential issues, one may answer to human problems during the process of psychotherapy, and might approximate oneself to authenticity, which means prosperity, well-being and integration of personality. I hope that the following paper will be a contribution to polemics and treatment not only among psychotherapists but also among the milieu of philosophers.

Keywords: existentialism, responsibility, psychotherapy, Yalom, Heidegger

The aim of the present paper is to consider the role that responsibility plays in the process of psychotherapy and its integrative character. Given that there is a wide range of therapies, I will focus on the existential approach because it is within this framework that I have found a bridge between philosophy and psychotherapy. It is worth noting, though, that responsibility might take a comparable place in different types of therapies.

Existential psychotherapy

Existential psychotherapy has no founding fathers. Origins of this approach can be traced back to philosophy, namely existentialism of the turn of the 19th and 20th century.¹ Considering the many different interpretations of existentialism, understanding existential psychotherapy in a homogenous way must result in a misconception. In the book *Existential Therapies* (2003), Mick Cooper emphasizes variant forms of existential approaches. We read there:

... it is simply not possible to define the field of existential therapy in any single way... Rather, it is best understood as a rich tapestry of intersecting therapeutic practices, all of which orientate themselves around a shared concern: human lived-existence.²

Among a varied range of existential approaches to psychotherapy, we may find:

- L. Binswanger's Daseinanalysis,
- V. Frankl's logotherapy,
- M. Boss's work on Daseinanalysis,
- J. Bugental's existential-humanistic approach,
- D. Yalom's psychotherapy,
- R.D. Laing's existential approach to schizophrenia,
- R. May's focus on anxiety and love from existential perspective.

Therefore, it is more advisable to talk about existential therapies.³ There is no single paradigm which one could take as a bedrock of therapeutic practices. Looking at the history of such approaches, we cannot identify one school that would be followed by others, as it was the case with Freud followed by his students. Existential therapies comprise a wide spectrum of directions and even existential psychotherapists show them in variant ways. However, in *Existentialism and Existential Psychotherapy*, Emmy van Deurzen mentions central existential issues that perhaps may rise during the process of therapy. Among them there are: ontological context, searching for mean-

¹ E. van Deurzen: *Existentialism and existential psychotherapy*: 'Existential psychotherapy is the only established form of psychotherapy that is directly based in philosophy rather in psychology', In: Ch. Mace (ed.): *Heart and Soul: The Therapeutic Face of Philosophy*. London, Routledge, 1999, p. 217.

² M. Cooper: *Existential Therapies*. London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2003, p. 1.

³ Ibid.

ing of life, existential anxiety, intentionality, lived world, limit situation, self-deception, time, the fragile self, existential guilt, care, mood, discourse, communication, paradox,⁴ etc.

Some of the aspects mentioned above are discussed in the book *Existential Psychotherapy* by American psychiatrist Irvin Yalom. Yalom states that the existential approach of psychotherapy is rooted in dynamically oriented psychotherapy, which assumes that:

... there are forces in conflict within the individual, and that thought, emotion, and behavior, both adaptive and psychopathological, are the resultant of these conflicting forces.⁵

In contrast to Freudian and Neo-Freudian approaches, existential psychodynamics is (according to the psychiatrist) concerned with human endeavours linked to four “givens of existence”: death, freedom, existential isolation and meaninglessness. Their characteristics are as follows:

1. **Death:** finiteness of human existence is undeniable. Death touches everyone and there is no possibility to step out of it. The fact of own finiteness is the origin of anxiety and thus might be the origin of psychopathology. Yalom distinguishes two main forms of denying death: a) believing in one’s own specialness and b) believing in the ultimate rescuer.⁶ Inasmuch as death is a limit situation, these are the ways to alleviate its burdening impact.
2. **Freedom:** it is understood as a lack of ground (groundlessness). It implies that one does not live in a ready-made structure which was established without one’s involvement in it. There is no such structure and one must confront oneself and withstand the openness of existence to a void. Therefore, freedom might be taken by a human being as a privilege or as a burden.
3. **Existential isolation:** Yalom distinguishes three kinds of isolation: a) interpersonal, b) intrapersonal, and c) existential. The last type of isolation does not relate to social environment where we live, so it is not connected with relations to other people (interpersonal isolation) or with isolation within one’s psyche (intrapersonal isolation). Existential isolation means that one is separated on the basis of one’s existence. At the heart of one’s being there is always the first person ‘I.’ It is always ‘I’ that dies, it is always ‘I’ that is

⁴ E. van Deurzen: *Existentialism and existential psychotherapy...*, p. 215—236.

⁵ I.D. Yalom: *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York, HarperCollins Publishers, p. 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 129.

free and responsible for the shape of one's life, and it is always 'I' that is made to consider the meaning of life.

4. Meaninglessness: the three concerns of existence mentioned above lead to the fourth one, captured in the question: *Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?*⁷ It intimates that the meaning is never ready to one and must be formed. If one takes into consideration that one is mortal and cannot escape existential isolation and one's own finiteness, one must somehow deal with primordial freedom. From this position one ought to respond to one's situation in the world and act within it. The lack of granted (given) meaning alters into a lifelong task which one is entangled in.

The process of Yalom's therapy builds on the four givens of existence and on their basis tackles emerging conflicts of an individual. Awareness of the concerns discloses an absence of shelter and might lead to anxiety (*Angst*). In an attempt to cope with it, one may create a defence mechanism. As examples of defence mechanisms related to responsibility, Yalom mentions:

- compulsivity,
- displacement of responsibility to another person,
- denial, which means losing control over demanding situations, and becoming "unconscious" of one's real input,
- avoidance of autonomous action,
- decisional pathology.⁸

Defence mechanisms have a deeply relieving aspect but are thereby a chokepoint on the way to development. Furthermore, in comparison to Freudian psychodynamics, existential psychodynamics does not rest on the assumption that early childhood experiences have critical impact on the process of a person's development. As mentioned above, it is thought that inner conflicts arise most of all from anxiety toward an existential situation:

... to think about the relationship between one's feet and the ground beneath one, between one's consciousness and the space around one; it means to think not about the way one came to be the way one is, but that one is. The past—that is, one's memory of the past—is important insofar as it is part of one's current existence and has contributed to one's current mode of facing one's ultimate concerns...⁹

⁷ M. Heidegger: *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. G. Fried, R. Polt. Yale University Press, New Haven/ London 2000, p. 1.

⁸ I.D. Yalom: *Existential psychotherapy...*, p. 224.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Although past experiences might be influential and in many cases essential to consider whilst curing, in the existential approach they are not taken as main factors to deal with during the process. Yalom also states that there are concerns which cannot be found in psychotherapeutic literature and cannot be taught during the studies, but which have to be found by therapist on his own¹⁰ and within a particular therapeutic relation to a patient. It is grasped by Emmy van Deurzen in the following way:

... existential approach resists formalization and opposes the fabrication of a method that can be taught as a technique and followed automatically. Existential psychotherapy has to be reinvented and recreated by every therapist and with every new client. It is essentially about investigating human existence and the popular preoccupations of one individual and this has to be done without preconceptions or set ways of proceeding. There has to be complete openness to the individual situation and an attitude of wonder that will allow the specific circumstances and experiences to unfold in their own right.¹¹

Responsibility

Perusing the psychotherapy literature, one may notice that responsibility seems to constitute a base which is essential during the process of therapy, and that without responsibility, it would not be possible to make a genuine step forward. Yalom finds the grounds for this perspective in understanding a man in the existential approach. He is well-known for his references to Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger, and on the basis of such approaches, he offers a vision of existential therapy.

In 1980, Yalom published a book entitled *Existential Psychotherapy*. Though this American psychiatrist is not a philosopher, we can find philosophical inquiries there. One of them is the role of responsibility in one's life. For Yalom, responsibility means authorship:

¹⁰ K. Horney: *Wykłady ostatnie*. Poznań, Dom Wydawniczy REBIS, 2000.

¹¹ E. van Deurzen: *Existentialism and existential psychotherapy...*, p. 218—219.

To be aware of responsibility is to be aware of creating one's own self, destiny, life predicament, feelings and, if such be the case, one's own suffering. For the patient who will not accept such responsibility, who persists in blaming others — either other individuals or other forces — for his or her dysphoria, no real therapy is possible.¹²

Existential psychotherapy is inextricably tied up with existence and ceases with death of an individual. Likewise, Jacek Filek refers to this issue in his book *Filozofia odpowiedzialności XX wieku* (The philosophy of responsibility in the 20th century), where he claims that responsibility belongs to the basic structure of a human being, whether he or she chooses it or not, which means it is not dependent on the will, but rather forms a person essentially.¹³ Emmanuel Levinas, asked about responsibility by Philippe Nemo in *Ethics and Infinity*, answers:

[Responsibility is] ... the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity.¹⁴

Thus, responsibility is a way of Being (*Sein*) and one is always enmeshed with it. However, there might be a twofold attitude toward responsibility: a) a person may undertake the task which it brings, or b) might be trying to hide from it by fleeing. At this point of *Existential Psychotherapy*, the following question is asked: can one escape from responsibility without any further implications for one's mental health? Yalom maintains that the answer is univocal — a person who shies away from taking responsibility cannot do it without encumbering costs on his or her psychological well-being. The presumptive getaway is in fact a deceptive step. Lack of genuine escape means that a human being is not only *condemned to be free* (Sartre), but also condemned to be responsible.

To present this twofold approach toward responsibility, one may ask how it is revealed in everyday life. From Yalom's perspective, one should take into consideration two tendencies of finding oneself motivated: a) internal or b) external. The American psychiatrist mentions that there are no empirical researches on the role of responsibility in psychotherapy. It is not easy to determine whether it influences

¹² I.D. Yalom: *Existential Psychotherapy...*, p. 218.

¹³ J. Filek: *Filozofia odpowiedzialności XX wieku*. Kraków, Wydawnictwo Znak, 2003, p. 10.

¹⁴ E. Levinas: *Etyka i Nieskończony*. Kraków, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Papieskiej Akademii Teologicznej, 1991, p. 54.

a person directly or not. That is the reason why Yalom searches for notions connected with responsibility and as one he proposes the locus of control (mentioned above): a) being focused inward and finding motivation within oneself; or analogously b) being focused outward. This dualistic distinction encapsulates a human being as one that: in respect of a), finds him or herself responsible for the shape of his or her existence or, as for b), finds the outside world to be responsible for his or her selections. As a consequence of such attitudes, the ways of experiencing the world and understanding one's situation in it are designated. According to the psychotherapist, imputing responsibility to the outer world brings malignant effects:

Any system that explains behavior and mental experience on the basis of phenomena (for example, past or present environmental events, instinctual drives) outside the domain of individual responsibility leads to a treacherous position for the therapist.¹⁵

And:

A patient ... must be helped to appreciate how he or she has contributed to that situation: for example, by choosing to stay married, to hold two jobs, to keep three dogs, to maintain a formal garden, and so forth. Generally one's life becomes so structured that one begins to consider it as a given, as a concrete structure that one must inhabit, rather than as a web, spun by oneself, which could be spun again in any number of ways.¹⁶

And further:

A therapist who counters a patient's excuse for behavior ("It was not deliberate. I did it unconsciously.") with the question "Whose unconscious is it?" is encouraging responsibility awareness. As is the therapist who asks a patient to „own“ what happens to him or her: (not "he bugs me," but "I let him bug me").¹⁷

Yalom shows that there is a huge role of group therapy in raising responsibility. A group is a miniature of the social world of the patient, and during the session problems of a particular patient emerge from others' perspectives. That enables the patient to realize how he or she participates in creating his or her situation.

¹⁵ I.D. Yalom: *Existential psychotherapy...*, p. 348.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

To bring one out of oneself (to open up responsibility in oneself), means (necessarily) to relate to one's own responsibility. The issue must touch a raw nerve and apply to individual existence. Thinking about responsibility *in abstracto* is not enough. It is of crucial importance to find oneself responsible. Moreover, the issue is not concerned with the bipolar evaluative notion which defines one's morality as appropriate or not. Perhaps, it mainly refers to broaden the boundaries within which one understands oneself. Hence, lack of responsibility (understood as a getaway) brings reduction of human's abilities, abandonment of one's own existence, and finding others who are responsible:

One of the more common dynamic defenses against responsibility awareness is the creation of a psychic world in which one does not experience freedom but exists under sway of some irresistible egoalien ('not-me') force.¹⁸

Undertaking responsibility is a moment of transition: one stops taking and understanding one's existence as something that is imposed, stops transferring the burden of one's own choices on other people or circumstances. If one sees oneself as a responsible human being, one is able to respond to the world with awareness of fashioning one's own world, and gives evidence of this ability by responding to it. Thus, taking responsibility has integrative character during the process of therapy as it enables a patient to surmount his or her isolation from the world. Increasing the ability to take one's own responsibility becomes a wellspring for developing real competencies.¹⁹

Becoming open to experiencing oneself as responsible requires bravery to confront with loneliness.²⁰ Responsibility understood in this way might become a challenge, which someone may take or, as mentioned above, try to escape. Yalom refers to Heidegger and associates loneliness with groundlessness. The aim of therapy is redirecting one's belief system by which one expects external salvation (the ultimate rescuer) and tries to camouflage lack of ground:

One avoids situations (for example, making decisions, isolation, autonomous action) that, if deeply considered, would make one aware of one's fundamental groundlessness. Thus one seeks structure, authority, grand designs, magic, something that is big-

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 334.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 221.

ger than oneself. Even a tyrant, as Fromm reminds us in *Escape from Freedom*, is better than no leader at all.²¹

Being and Time exposes responsibility as inscribed in an ontological structure of Dasein. It means that Dasein is in charge of responsibility due to the way of its Being. Heidegger states that responsibility is linked with *the they-self*. But who are *the they-self*? In the text we may read:

We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way they enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way they see and judge. But we also withdraw from the “great mass” the way they withdraw, we find “shocking” what they find shocking. The they, which is nothing definite and which all are, though not as a sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.²²

The they-self stay anonymous, we cannot find any particular person behind them. At the same time *the they-self* take away responsibility from Dasein or, more precisely, Dasein lets itself be deprived of responsibility:

Da-sein flees from thrownness to the alleviation that comes with the supposed freedom of the they-self.²³

Because Dasein is ‘thrown’ into the world and accordingly might experience overwhelming anxiety, it looks for a relief. Nonetheless, ‘losing’ responsibility does not happen in a fundamental (ontological) way. Dasein always stays responsible even if it lets *the they-self* dominate by modifying itself into ‘average everydayness.’²⁴ From this perspective, Dasein does not make its own decisions but the decisions are made by a group subject. However, ‘average everydayness’ is not the only way of Dasein’s *being-in-the-world*. According to the German thinker, Dasein’s *ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self*²⁵ is called authenticity. Heidegger states that inasmuch as the ontological basis of existence is fundamental, Dasein is being called by its conscience to ‘come back’ from lostness in *the they-self*.²⁶ Dasein is both calling and

²¹ Ibid., p. 222.

²² M. Heidegger: *Being and Time*. Trans. J. Stambaugh. New York, New York Press, 1996, p. 119.

²³ Ibid., p. 255.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 119.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 248.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 254.

being called. The calling is generated by no one else then Dasein's own self; hence, it is the one who is found as *caring*. But what is the message of the call? We read:

Conscience speaks solely and constantly in the mode of silence.
... And to what is one summoned? To one's own self.²⁷

Dasein is being called to stay open to the possibilities offered by existence. This is where its responsibility is situated. Needless to say, such responsibility does not pertain to ethical perspective, but ethical concerns find roots in it. *Being and Time* contains one more notion that might be erroneously understood in an ethical way: guilt. We read that Dasein is guilty.²⁸ Dasein is guilty to become itself, to choose itself, to break away from *the they-self*, and to withstand being as groundlessness. Conscience gives Dasein awareness of being guilty itself:

... at bottom conscience is essentially always mine ... the call comes from the being that I myself always am.²⁹

Experience of 'that I *am*', 'that the world *is*' and 'that the people *are*' — experience of 'that *is*' — is eerie and *ipso facto* directed toward anxiety brought by the feeling of shelterlessness, of not being familiar with the world any more. Being authentic means Being responsible on the basis of the inmost depth of existence. Analogously, Being not responsible means not Being a self, it means omission, abandonment and deprivation of authentic self. From this standpoint, I presume that it is close to Yalom's conclusions concerning responsibility and the locus of control: one (Dasein) finds it either within oneself (on the basis of one's existence) or in the external world (as *the they-self*). The direction toward authenticity is to 'let it be' (*Gelassenheit*): if a being is open to Being (as Dasein is), responsibility is to 'let it be' open to Being as it is given to Dasein. Therefore, not 'letting it be' means that Dasein engenders some blockages located within its own way of Being, and does not allow itself to be as it ontologically is:

... neurotic and psychotic patients suffered from a constriction, or "blockage" of their world openness. Occasionally, for example, an

²⁷ Ibid., p. 252.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 259.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 257.

individual refused a “world-relation” through a “bodily-jamming.”³⁰

In the confrontation with groundlessness, one has to face the question about one’s everydayness. If one confronts groundlessness, one must act without any solid ground that could serve as a foundation of one’s every day activities.

Summarizing, according to the existential approach, a human being is responsible by virtue of the very fact of his or her existence. Yalom maintains that this situation produces a twofold attitude: one may assume responsibility or try to get away from it. In an escape, one finds oneself severed from one’s existence in its true shape and experiences a heavy psychological burden as a cost of such a decision. At the other end of the spectrum, undertaking responsibility demands a genuine engagement and persistence, but also brings prosperity and well-being. If Yalom’s conclusion is applicable, one ought to find such a transition on one’s own by assuming responsibility for one’s thoughts, emotions, behaviors, speeches, choices, etc. As a psychotherapist, Yalom himself applied this practice to his patients. A similar application of Heidegger’s conception might be found in M. Boss’s work. Their endeavours seem to reflect the fact that assuming responsibility has crucial impact on mind healing and therefore reveals the importance of existential depth in the process of psychotherapy.

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³⁰ M. Heidegger: *Zollikon Seminars. Protocols-Conversations-Letters*. Trans. F. Mayr, R. Askay. Evanston, ILL: Northwestern University Press, 2001, p. 308.

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