

# 17. Existentialism: From the Age of Anxiety to the Present

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*[Unlike others, this chapter is written as a personal essay, which seemed appropriate given the individualistic nature of this philosophy. It also seemed essential to include the many ideas of philosophers here, more than in any other chapter, with the exception of Chapter 3. I titled it “Existentialism from the Age of Anxiety to the Present” partly because existentialism addressed the anxieties of those post-war times so well; but as I hope to show, this philosophy and its psychological applications are very much alive and relevant today as well.]*

## A Serious Young Student and his Times

There are some lovely, rugged shores along the Pacific Coast Highway bordering on the Los Angeles-Ventura County line. Leo Carrillo State Park had in earlier days furnished a backdrop for countless *B* (as in Beach) teen movies. The original “Gidget” was filmed there as well as a slew of corny beach party flicks. Most of the year the beach is frequented by surfers and sunbathers, but on a cool winter’s day by Southern California standards, I hunkered between the dunes, fully clothed in Levis and sweatshirt with windbreaker zipped tightly to the neck as the brilliant sunlight belied the chilly breeze wafting from beyond the shoreline. Less than ideal weather was the price paid for my solitude as I focused intently on a paperback copy of Sartre’s (1938/2013) “Nausea” – a gloomy book well-suited to the gloomy day.

This snapshot memory is from early in 1961 when it was trendy for college students to study the esoteric, largely European philosophy of existentialism. We visualized Parisians in outdoor cafés absorbed in philosophical debates because, after all, these were truly deep thinkers who pondered ultimate questions concerning the very meaning of human existence. And what could be more profound than that? In the corner of the cafeteria in the college I attended, directly opposite the perpetual, drop-in circle of hearts players, was our little hub of intellectual thought. *Un autre café, mes amis? Peut-être quelques discussions philosophiques?*

Alas, this was the best we could do for atmosphere in our commuter college. Following classes in the late afternoon the cafeteria became the land of boiled coffee and limp salad greens. And while none of us actually wore berets, smoking was viewed as a symbol of sophistication. Students followed the examples of our instructors who would light up while lecturing. It would be another three years before the United States Surgeon General issued his historic report on the dangers of tobacco at a time when almost everyone smoked. The inauguration of John Kennedy in January marked the end of the Eisenhower administration but with the Beatles craze still a couple of years away the times still felt more fifties than sixties. I attended a California state college as a beneficiary of that state's generous Master Plan enacted under Governor Pat Brown for low cost higher education, available to all who would take advantage of the system. As no one in my family had attended college before me, I understood that I was in some way privileged to be doing so.

Well-dressed college men of my day preferred Ivy League shirts and crew-cuts, corduroy or seersucker sports coats, scrawny "noodle" neckties, and perhaps some two-toned wingtips, or plain loafers. College women favored plain blouses or twin sets and pleated skirts, conservative suits or day dresses, with saddle shoes or basic black pumps, and heels for formal occasions. They wore ribboned pony tails with bangs or Annette Funicello bouffant hair styles with flips. The youthful Jackie Kennedy was their fashion role model. Our campus then was very middle-class, and mostly white.

We psychology students studied courses with titles similar to those we still see in college catalogs but classical learning theory then held a strong influence in the field with behaviorism the dominant paradigm in this, the tail-end of the rat psychology era. But we psych majors were more focused on methods of therapy and humanistic theories. Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow were popular favorites. Erich Fromm was also widely read and discussed outside the classroom. Ditto Freud, but even more so the neo-Freudians, following in the psychodynamic tradition: Erikson,

Horney, Adler, Jung, and Sullivan. Then there were Rollo May, Viktor Frankl, and other existentialist psychologists.

Alienation was a popular theme in academe. Fromm and the existentialists wrote about it, as did sociologists in the tradition of Emile Durkheim. We students felt alienated without quite knowing why. Despite the postwar economic expansion and relative good times, more seemed to be happening than we could fully grasp, and a kind of free-floating anxiety permeated our little microcosm. Somehow we failed to see the big picture of our times, I think because unknowingly we were living in a transitional period: something was happening here but you didn't know what it was, did you Mr. College Sophomore? As history shows, radical cultural changes did occur as the decade unfolded. But there was plenty to be anxious about in 1961. Abroad, the construction of the Berlin wall began that summer and Vietnam heated up in the fall. Most of my pals and I were draft eligible. Americans suffered residual anxiety from the threat of a nuclear war. The Civil Rights Movement had advanced well beyond the early stages of sit-in demonstrations in the South. That year that the Freedom Riders – led by James L. Farmer, William Sloane Coffin and others – rode their peaceful, integrated busses through the Southern states to protest segregation policies and where they were met with violent clashes. Within just a few years our college would become much more diversified by changes resulting from the demands of student protestors after campus activism culminated with a takeover of the administration building.

Existentialism as a philosophy seemed especially suited to those fearful times, precisely because confronting anxieties triggered by life's uncertainties lies at its core. We students witnessed the rise of existentialism in American thought in those turbulent years as artists, writers, and philosophers somberly advanced its themes.

### **Existentialism and Meaning in Philosophy and Psychology**

Imagine the early morning sun's rays casting long shadows on forested woodland. A stag raises his head, displaying his majestic crown of antlers, and sniffs the air for a few moments before

venturing into a meadow to forage. A human being can never know what this animal senses but imagination might suggest a certain feeling-tone on his part. Perhaps he has been here before, and the scent in the air is a familiar and safe one. But could he in any sense be aware of himself as a “being” in the context of this setting with a sense of self? We do know that neither this deer nor any other animal has the same self-referential consciousness that we humans possess. He lacks the mental structures needed to anticipate the distant future or to grasp his place in the Great Scheme of Things. Perhaps he may be aware of himself but he cannot be aware of being aware as are we, nor can he think about thought. And although he may behave in accordance with his social standing within the cervine community, he lacks the cognitive abilities to enable him to muse about his relationships with other members of the herd. Surely his actions, too (might he challenge another buck today?), are reflexive and instinctual in contrast to a person’s sometimes carefully thought-through and angst-ridden decision processes (“What if I can’t get my draft deferment?”). And unlike this buck we people have an awareness of our mortality. We understand that eventually all of us are, in Heidegger’s language, beings-unto-death; and it is in this awareness that we differ from other species. This realization is fundamental to existentialist philosophy.

Existentialism has its origins in the nineteenth century in the writings of Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche. In the twentieth century some of its more influential writers were Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Tillich, Buber, Ortega y Gasset, and Camus. Twentieth century existentialist psychologists include Europeans Ludwig Binswanger, Medard Boss, and Viktor Frankl, and Americans Rollo May and Irvin Yalom. May (e.g., May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958) and Yalom (e.g., 1980) fostered a new movement within American psychology. What the existential writers have in common is not agreement, but rather a rejection of traditional philosophy and particularly the academicism espoused in universities. Walter Kaufmann (1956, p. 11) concluded in “Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre” that “Existentialism is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts

against traditional philosophy...one essential feature shared by these [existentialists] is their fervid individualism.”

Existential philosophers are concerned with the meaning that people make of their existence; how we choose to live our lives, given the inevitability of death. As a dread of nonbeing existential angst differs from Freud’s neurotic anxiety. Confronting our mortality causes existential anxiety, and the failure to face it (denial) results in existential guilt. May understood this well. In his youth he spent three years in a sanitarium after contracting tuberculosis. He learned to be an active agent in his own healing as he struggled to survive. This is a lesson that Frankl (1947/1963) also preached: those who survived in concentration camps, Frankl believed, were motivated by a *will to meaning*, in contrast to Nietzsche’s will to power, or to Freud’s pleasure principle. These people managed to look with hope toward the future despite their oppressive circumstances. Those who lived only for the small pleasures to which they were addicted – the next cigarette or cup of coffee – were the first to perish.

Heidegger (1927/2008) believed a person can choose to live an authentic life or an inauthentic one. A person living authentically comes to terms with the source of her or his anxiety by accepting the inevitability of existing as a being-toward-death. Heidegger coined the term “thrownness”: we are thrown into the stream of life’s circumstances over which we have little say. We do not choose our parents, nor our nationality, social class, or the ethnicity into which we are born. But existentialists assert that people possess freedom, and with freedom comes responsibility for the choices we make. By contrast the inauthentic life is one in which a person merely exists. Like an animal following its herd, the inauthentic individual simply conforms. Sartre believed that “existence precedes essence,” a phrase which became a credo for some existentialists. The more difficult path is to choose a way of living, to create one’s essence.

For Sartre life as given is utterly meaningless and it is up to each of us invent ourselves. Obviously this is not an easy route, which is why existentialists believe that most are content to live conventional and inauthentic lives. Heidegger called this choice

“fallenness.” But unlike Sartre not all existentialists were atheists. Kierkegaard, Buber, Frankl, and Tillich found meaning in religion. Yet they still valued freedom and personal responsibility. Kierkegaard was contemptuous of pro forma religious practice. Mere adherence to dogma and ritual just would not cut it. For him doubt and struggle were, paradoxically, requisites for genuine belief.

### **The Three realms of Existence**

Following Heidegger, Binswanger and other existential therapists viewed people as inhabiting three overlapping worlds: the world of nature and things (*Umwelt*); of people or interpersonal relations (*Mitwelt*); and of self (*Eigenwelt*). The balancing of one’s life demands coming to terms with each of these domains: we can connect with them, or we can become alienated from them. (I shall refer to these “Welts” more simply as the Natural Sphere, the Social Sphere, and the Inner Sphere.)

In the Natural Sphere Heidegger lamented the ways in which the industrial revolution changed the world. It became too technological, and the danger from this was alienation from the nature. And we have become an ever more technological world since. Many of us have indeed lost touch with nature in a world of endless freeways, mega-skyscrapers, maxi- and mini-malls, and ubiquitous commercialism. Even in Paris one now finds McDonald’s and Pizza Hut fast food restaurants. Viewed as menacing by some, benign by others, Americanization is a reality. In this global technocracy nighttime skies are distorted by light pollution so we can no longer clearly view the stars and constellations. Some inner city dwellers have never seen a forest or ocean. When people do “get away from it all” they often fail to truly escape from the trappings of civilization, carting with them the electronic gadgets upon which they depend.

May viewed the bomb as the greatest threat of his time. He saw the fear of nuclear war as a major source of alienation from the natural world. In “Love and Will” May stated:

The greater our alienation from nature – alienation’s ultimate symbol being the atom bomb and radiation – the closer we actually are to death. The rape of nature in the form of the splitting of the atom is thus related to our fear of death, our guilt . . . , and our consequently redoubled need to *repress the consciousness of death*. And here the mother symbol enters; we speak of mother nature. It is not a far cry from experiencing the achievement of the splitting of the atom as gaining power over the “eternal feminine.” The atom bomb sets us into conflict with the symbolic mother. This is why the construction of the bomb carries such a personal symbolic power for almost everyone. (1969, p. 107, emphasis added.)

My youthful understanding of the atomic bomb gradually changed from amazement and awe to fear and anxiety. As a boy of just five years I sent fifteen cents along with a cereal box top to General Mills to purchase a mail-order toy, the Kix Atom Bomb Ring. It seemed like months went by before it came because a child’s sense of time is very different from an adult’s. Meanwhile the other kids in my neighborhood and school had received their rings.

I was elated when it finally arrived. The gold finger band supported a bomb-shaped figure consisting of two sections, the silver head and the red tail end complete with fins. These sections came apart and as I gazed into the silver half I could “see the stars” as flashes of light, which, according to the Oak Ridge Association of Universities web site (ORAU, 2011), were “scintillations caused by polonium alpha particles striking a zinc sulfide screen.” Inside the ring I could hide secret messages! What a wondrous gadget for a boy to own.

At that age I had no clue as to what the atom bomb really was, or what it meant to the postwar world. Kids knew that the bomb represented tremendous power, and that it must be good because it brought about the end of the terrible war. We didn’t comprehend

its awesome destructiveness nor did we realize that it was dropped on cities populated by thousands of civilians with horrifying consequences. But just a year or two later I remember waking up at night in a cold sweat from a nightmare in which enemy planes flew overhead searching me out to drop one of these A-Bombs directly on top of my head! I woke my parents, who consoled and comforted me. I finally was able to return to my bed to sleep but my fears were only slightly allayed.

What had transpired was that I, along with the rest of society, had begun to glimpse the true power of this weapon and to experience the fears and the paranoia that others were experiencing in our new Atomic Age. In grade school children were taught to duck and cover during bomb drills as the teacher abruptly yelled “Drop!” We immediately dropped whatever we were doing, and crawled under our desks into a kind of fetal position, crouching and cringing with arms and hands simultaneously covering our heads and faces until the “all clear” was given. In the event of a real attack would this have saved us? Probably not, but they certainly reinforced our fears.

The closer we are to the possibility of death the greater the degree of collective angst and alienation. The late anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973) claimed that extreme fear increases “mortality salience,” or in other words, we cannot avoid confronting the real possibility of death. Existentialism provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of these fears, if not an escape from them, and that is its appeal to philosophers and psychologists.

Existentialists recognized that one can become estranged from other people (the Social Sphere) as well as from the Natural Sphere. I think that one may safely assume that neither Kierkegaard nor Nietzsche would have felt at home at the modern cocktail party, or in the typical business meeting, where people pass the time with surface banter. Alienation from the Social Sphere can be seen in any situation in which another person is regarded as an object or to be used by another without consent; for example, simply to gratify sexual and power drives.



But people can also become alienated from themselves (Inner Sphere). Many of us choose to escape from ourselves and methods for doing so abound via addictive or compulsive behaviors. People can lose themselves in the numbing murkiness of drugs or alcohol, for instance, and two people can mutually support one another in a flight from reality, as in the alcoholic's codependent partnership with her or his mate or lover.

Some people really do seem to regard themselves as objects rather than individuals. In "Escape from Freedom" Erich Fromm (1941/1994) considered the marketing character: a person who views him or herself as a commodity whose value as a person is determined by the judgments of others and by the extent to which they fit in with the needs of the modern, industrialized world. When considered as "meat markets," singles bars nicely capture Fromm's concept. Fromm deplored the conformism in modern times and the basic anxiety that people experienced from their lack of rootedness.

### **Existentialism and Anxiety in Popular Culture**

"[L]iterary artists symbolically express, often with remarkable fidelity, the unconscious assumptions and conflicts of their culture," stated May in "The Meaning of Anxiety." May's book (written in 1950 but later updated; May, 1977) May, remains a remarkable treatise on anxiety and the human condition in the tradition of Kierkegaard. It also provides an insightful socio-historic analysis of American, and perhaps of Western, culture in the mid-twentieth century. A major thesis of May's is that anxiety was pervasive yet covert in the earlier part of the twentieth century, following the First World War, but that overt anxiety characterized the post-Second World War era, mainly due to the threat of nuclear warfare. But be it overt or covert, psychologists presume that greater anxiety leads to increased conformity to the in-group and hostility toward those who are perceived as different. Fascism in prewar Europe is an obvious example. May claimed that covert anxiety, as well as conformity and alienation, were echoed in Thomas Wolfe's (1934/2011) "You Can't Go Home Again". It seems to me that Eliot's Prufrock, psychologically paralyzed and

unable to confront his overwhelming question, was prototypically another; and Eliot's "The Wasteland" portrayed postwar anxiety, despair, and disillusionment as well.

May gave few literary examples from the era following the war (his age of overt anxiety) though he noted the postwar resurgence in interest in the novels of Franz Kafka and Herman Hesse, both of which captured the pervasive sense of alienation of the times. So I will add to these by citing trends in literature and in our broader, popular culture. W. H. Auden won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1948 for "The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue." He highlighted the anxieties exhibited by each of the four lonely, anxious people who meet in a bar during the Second World War. In his prologue to the poem Auden wrote: "When the historical process breaks down and armies organize with their embossed debates the ensuing void which they can never consecrate, when necessity is associated with horror and freedom with boredom, then it looks good for the bar business." Leonard Bernstein composed his own "Age of Anxiety," a programmatic symphony for orchestra with piano, to capture the unease experienced by Auden's characters.

Popular books in the fifties echoed themes of alienation and conformity, including William Whyte's (1954) "The Organization Man" and "The Lonely Crowd," by David Riesman and colleagues (1963). Whyte saw modern men as having lost their individuality, instead becoming part of the corporate rat race. Riesman identified three types of people: tradition-oriented people who cling to old fashioned values instilled by society, religion, and parents; other-directed people, who follow the crowd; and inner-directed people, who think for themselves. Riesman believed that industrialized society produced mainly other-directed types who wished to be accepted by others, rather than being respected by them. Sloan Wilson's (1955) "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit," made into a film starring Gregory Peck, portrayed a man caught in a conflict between integrity and ambition. The protagonist was a Madison Avenue advertising executive – the organization man personified.

Arthur Miller's (1949/1976) play "Death of a Salesman" appeared shortly after the war. His Willy Loman, a kind of other directed character, insisted on the importance of being "not just liked, but well-liked." The real tragedy of the play is that Loman tried so hard to succeed in American society yet was eulogized at the end of the play as a man who never really understood who he was. Samuel Beckett's absurdist "Waiting for Godot," also captured the conformism and alienation of the age, as did Eugene Ionesco's (1960) "Rhinoceros," and Edward Albee's (1961/1997) "The American Dream." Teen angst was acutely portrayed in J. D. Salinger's (1951) "The Catcher in the Rye," and in the Nicholas Ray film, "Rebel without a Cause," featuring James Dean and Natalie Wood.

Some notable rebels voiced their rejection of conformity. Before Timothy Leary's dictum of "turn on, tune in, drop out" bearded men wearing berets read "beat" poetry in coffee houses to the rhythm of live bongo drums. Women in dramatic black leotards (predating the Goth look by decades) looked equally grim. Reactions against conventionality breed in themselves, time and again, their own modes of conformism. Yet the Beat literary movement burst with raw originality, producing poets Allen Ginsburg ("Howl"; 1956), whose words not only jump off the page, they slap us squarely in the face; and Lawrence Ferlinghetti ("A Coney Island of the Mind"; 1958). There were also novelists Jack Kerouac ("On the Road"; 1957) and William Burroughs ("Naked Lunch"; 1959). Kerouac was an alcoholic, Burroughs a heroin user who wrote homoerotic themes (as did Ginsburg) in a time when most recognized writers would not broach these subjects. Although divided (Truman Capote's verdict: this wasn't writing, just typing), some considered these men important writers; and though certain of their works have aged better than others, their dark and provocative reactions to the Cold War, the Bomb, and the Madison Avenue Organization Man, could only have been scripted in the Age of Anxiety.

## **The Threat from Within**

Americans feared communism. If nuclear war was the threat from without then the threat from within was from communists in our midst. The egghead-hating Senator Joseph McCarthy led the House Un-American Activities Committee in the investigation of citizen's alleged Communist Party affiliations, past or present. Careers were ruined, most visibly those of Hollywood movie actors, directors, producers, and writers, who were blacklisted after their sympathies were publicized. Those who refused to name others also became victims of the blacklisting. Universities and other organizations were required to institute loyalty oaths in which people had to swear allegiance to the United States before being hired or to be retained. Many people accused by HUAC attended Party meetings simply out of curiosity. If someone was accused but took the Fifth Amendment, he or she was presumed guilty. Indeed, merely being accused was tantamount to being guilty in the minds of many people.

Some in Hollywood never forgave director Elia Kazan for reporting associates who had links to the Communist Party. Kazan, who was awarded an Oscar for lifetime achievement in 1999, had been a member of the Party in the 1930s, though he later renounced communism. His one-time friend, playwright Arthur Miller, conceded that he deserved the honor for his exceptional achievements, though for years following the HUAC investigations they never spoke. Miller's play "The Crucible" (1953/2016) was an allegory based on the HUAC hearings. Miller himself was closely scrutinized.

People began to feel that their rights to privacy were being violated by loyalty oaths, HUAC, and even their snoopy neighbors who were suspicious of anyone who looked or acted different. They came see McCarthyism as a kind of paranoia-inducing witch hunt. Ultimately McCarthy was defeated by influential people including journalist Edward R. Murrow and Army attorney Joseph N. Welch ("Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?")

Of course the totalitarian Soviet Union was rightfully seen as menacing. Stalin murdered more people than Hitler. Directly or indirectly, so did Mao Zedong in China. Although George

Orwell's "1984" was not prescient (that year came and went without his futuristic predictions coming to pass), its fictional setting was not far removed from the reality of the contemporary Soviet Union at that time. And there were indeed Americans who spied for the Soviets, among them Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed for espionage in 1953. The trial was controversial because of the very times: many people thought the penalty too harsh for the crime, and others were unsure of the Rosenberg's guilt.

### **The Decade of the Sixties**

The Age of Anxiety continued from the immediate postwar era through the sixties when tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union intensified as both began building bigger, deadlier nuclear weapons. The launch of the Soviet Sputnik satellite in 1957 led to fears that the Soviets had a head start on the West in space, and that they might soon be able to fire nuclear weapons from satellites. In 1961 the Soviets began construction of the Berlin Wall, dividing East from West Berlin. Then for a tense fortnight President John Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev fenced over the placement of secretly shipped nuclear missiles to Fidel Castro's Cuba, just ninety miles from our shores. None of us who were then alive can forget this time as the nation came perilously close to war, and quite possibly to a nuclear one. Fortunately the crisis ended peacefully with the Soviets' retreat.

Orwell's "1984" and William Golding's (1954) "Lord of the Flies" both addressed cold war fears. The first depicted a futuristic totalitarian state; the second was an allegory on the bleak possibilities for the breakdown of society following a major war. Several films highlighted fears of nuclear war and communism, including Stanley Kramer's "On the Beach" (again with Gregory Peck), John Frankenheimer's "Seven Days in May," and his "The Manchurian Candidate;" and Sidney Lumet's "Fail-safe." The dark themes had a lighter side in comedy relief with films like Carl Reiner's "The Russians are Coming, The Russians are Coming," and Kubric's black comedy, "Dr. Strangelove."

Some constructed underground backyard bomb shelters. In the early 1960s my girlfriend and I babysat for an affluent couple who had such a shelter. Demurely they led us to the entrance of its foreboding chamber so that we could see where the stash of food supplies and first aid kits were kept. It felt sterile and unearthly. (In retrospect a backyard pool would have been a much better investment.) In 1963 Bob Dylan's "Freewheelin'" album contained the protest songs "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna' Fall," "Talkin' World War III Blues," and "Let Me Die in My Footsteps" ("I will not go down under the ground/When somebody tells me that death's comin' round"). It was not unusual for couples of this era to forego having children because they feared there would be no future for them.

I saw Dylan in his first major concert appearance. As a guest of Joan Baez at the Hollywood Bowl he stole the show (with her tacit approval). He introduced his protest songs to a larger public for the first time. Like lots of college kids I was caught up in the folk music revival movement of the early sixties. Dylan's early music followed the folk and tradition of Woody Guthrie. The timeless Pete Seeger and other folk artists, both living and dead, were also being heard afresh by young folkies across the land. But this craze would soon give way to the resurgence and revitalization of rock music from Britain – and some never forgave Dylan for "going electric."

### **Changes in American Culture**

In the South segregation was still practiced into the 1960s. This included public as well as private establishments – stores, restaurants, hospitals, hotels, and so on. Jim Crow laws were in effect, and the vigilante Ku Klux Klan maintained this rigid social order, with lynchings (mainly of African-Americans) still common. Only in 2005 did the U.S. Senate issue a formal apology for these lynchings. Astoundingly, in the 1960s Congress could not pass anti-lynching legislation because of filibusters by conservative Southern senators. In the mid-twentieth century, until a Supreme Court decision in 1948, even establishments in northern and western states could refuse service to customers based solely

on ethnicity. There were hotels and restaurants that refused to accommodate not just black-skinned people, but also Jewish, Mexican-American, or Asian patrons. Prejudice and racism in America, both subtle and blatant, were portrayed in books like Laura Hobson's (1948) "Gentleman's Agreement" (anti-Semitism) and Harper Lee's (1960) "To Kill a Mockingbird" (Southern racism). Both were made into motion pictures, both again starring the ubiquitous Gregory Peck – who won an Oscar for his portrayal of small-town lawyer Atticus Finch in the latter.

A woman's place was still in the home, at least for the majority of women, as there were always notable exceptions; this was the socioeconomic model of the times. Many women attended college for enrichment purposes but were not expected to assume careers in medicine, law, or other high profile professions. If women joined the labor force it was usually in helping professions such as teaching and nursing. The man in the family was expected to take on the role of provider, with women assuming supporting roles as mothers and homemakers. This patriarchal model of the nuclear American family was portrayed and reinforced in such long-running television shows as "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet", "Father Knows Best," and "Leave it to Beaver."

When I was an undergraduate student in the early 1960s, a female student completing her master's degree was distraught not only because her advisor recognized her work as outstanding; she was also his prized pupil. Yet he felt that he could not, in good conscience, recommend her for Ph.D. work because she would be taking a needed place from a deserving male! He advised her instead to be content to support her family by being a good wife and mother. I had neither the psychological means nor the maturity to console her at the time, but I never forgot this uneasy moment: something was plainly wrong here. I regretted that I could not find the right words to support and console her. But at least this was a starting point for me as I began to question many cultural assumptions that I had implicitly taken for granted.

The 1960s and 1970s were a turning point in history as monumental social changes took place. As we all know, this was

an era of both upheaval and positive change, via the Civil Rights Movement, anti-Vietnam War protests, and feminist activism. The South became (or would become) fully integrated and throughout the country women became increasingly visible in the work force. Some influential voices of the period (to give just an abbreviated sampling) included: feminists Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem; civil rights activists Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thurgood Marshall; radical change advocates Huey Newton and Jerry Rubin; politicians John and Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Henry Kissinger; poets Maya Angelou, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath; writers James Baldwin, John Howard Griffin, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Norman Mailer, and Thomas Pynchon; journalists Tom Wolfe, David Halberstam, and Hunter S. Thompson; rock musicians Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa, and the Rolling Stones; and artists Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. In international relations tensions seemed to cool by the end of the decade, even as the arms race continued. Perhaps people simply became accustomed to the stresses of the times, but the era of the bomb shelters and the duck-and-cover drills had ended. Fears had peaked during the Berlin and Cuban missile crises. Later attempts at détente helped ease tensions. The threat of Mutually Assured Destruction restrained the superpowers and the Cold War was at a stalemate. And with the booming economy in the sixties, the threat of a communist revolution from within seemed a distant memory.

In retrospect it seems obvious that the need for reforms was essential for social progress but the means to that end were often violent, both on the part of the authorities (the Chicago police brutally attacked protesters during the 1968 Democratic convention), and on the part of some home-grown revolutionaries (the Weathermen, Black Panthers, and Symbionese Liberation Army). This period is remembered as a time of “free love,” but also as a time when psychedelic drugs (LSD, peyote, and marijuana) and other drugs were widely used. Although the era predated the AIDS epidemic, there were still dangers in unprotected sex. Leading voices in the world of Acid Rock (Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison) burned out and died. In



her “Slouching Toward Bethlehem” Joan Didion (1968, pp. 84-85) captured the darker side of the times:

It was not a country in open revolution. It was not a country under enemy siege. It was the United States of America in the cold late spring of 1967, and the market was steady and the G.N.P. high and a great many articulate people seemed to have a sense of high social purpose and it might have been a spring of brave hopes and national promise, but it was not...All that seemed clear was that at some point we had aborted ourselves and butchered the job...

So, whereas many people viewed the sixties as an exciting era of change and reform, others saw them as a frightening time of social breakdown. In retrospect it seems that both views had some validity. By contrast, depending on one’s point of view, the 1950s might be seen as a stagnant era of complacency and conformity, anxiety and racism, or a time of relative harmony in which “traditional family values” prevailed. And again, perhaps, both views contained some truth. *It depended on who and where one was; on one’s thrownness.* If the fifties was a time of institutionalized racism then the following decade was an era of social change as well as upheaval, at the cost of a near meltdown of the social order.

I recall my own comfortable upbringing by middle-class Protestant parents, who were Eisenhower Republicans, in a suburb of Los Angeles. So elated were they by his election that my mother invited my fourth-grade-school class to view his inauguration on television in a field trip away from school. Eighteen kids huddled around a tiny black and white set. It is easy to forget that in 1952 not everyone had a TV, and the televising of this event was an historical first. Looking back on these times in later years some of my boyhood pals would say man, you really did live in a Leave-it-to-Beaver household.

Of course I did not because in truth no one ever did, but memories are selective. Yes, we held strong ties – so-called traditional family values – but then our family could afford to hold them. In my mid-twenties I would break from the family tradition and register as a Democrat, mainly because I thought forward thinking people in this party took the high road on civil rights issues. Not the southern Dixiecrats of course, but most of those who were in the vanguard of the movement.

### **The Evolution of Existentialism**

Existentialism did not die following the Age of Anxiety. There are still therapists who incorporate existential concepts into their practices and philosophers with an existential bent. But as a cultural movement, existentialism seemed to have lost much of its force. Why? Perhaps it was the easing of tensions over the threat of nuclear war and the lessening of anxieties over the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. Perhaps attention was just diverted to other matters, such as concern over the war in Vietnam, which seemed at the time to be never ending, or to other social concerns. Perhaps interest in philosophic postmodernism helped to displace existentialism. Or, perhaps existentialism simply became a point of view that is taken for granted by many thinkers, which no longer required a movement to sustain its momentum. Although I didn't lose interest in existentialism entirely, my attention shifted over the next few years to some of the more exciting but eclectic work on the social psychology of the self, and to the newer domains of cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary psychology.

### **Terror Management Theory: An Experimental Approach to Existentialism**

Articles on a new theoretical approach in psychology called *terror management theory* (hereafter TMT) began to appear in psychology journals in the 1990s. This theory was first advanced by psychologists Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski (see especially “In the Wake of 9/11; 2003), who as graduate students at the University of Kansas followed Ernest Becker's work – especially “The Denial of Death,” for which he

was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1973. Underlying TMT are the assumptions that culture and individual self-esteem evolved to help us manage the blinding terror we all would feel in the face of death without recourse to the defenses that they provide. In their first attempt to publish their ideas their manuscript was rejected by a peer reviewer who claimed that the theory could not possibly be of interest to any serious psychologist! Perhaps the reviewer thought, as did I at first, that “terror management theory” was an odd, unappealing name for a psychological theory; one which promoted a bleak view of existence at a time when others were optimistically advancing motivational theories that emphasized self-expansion and positive growth potential. But after delving more deeply into their works, I came to understand how intimately TMT was linked to existentialism as they began calling themselves *experimental* existentialist psychologists.

Traditionally, existential psychologists eschewed the rigors of experimental psychology, or attempts to objectively evaluate their therapies. It isn’t difficult to understand why: they regarded the most important values in life, such as “a meaningful existence,” or “authentic living,” as concepts that can only be understood in personal, highly subjective and experiential ways. How, they wondered, could such experiences be captured and quantitatively evaluated? There is an appealing romanticism in this notion, of the kind expressed in the E. E. Cummings’ poem (2016, p. 183) “voices to voices, lip to lip”:

While you and i have lips and voices which  
are for kissing and to sing with  
who cares if some one-eyed son for a bitch  
invents an instrument to measure Spring with?

(In an issue of *Harvard Magazine* (Anonymous, 2002) displayed a relic found in its basement collection of historic scientific instruments: “Among [the] treasures is an ivory pocket sundial...made in 1613 in Nuremberg, Germany, by Lienhart Miller, that enables the user to know precisely when spring arrives and exult accordingly.” Mr. Miller, who seems to have possessed a

kind of eccentric genius, does make an easy foil for Cumming's caricature.)

So instead of focusing on laboratory experiments, existential psychologists made extensive use of case histories. These can indeed capture the emotional depth of human experience. Or they took the literary path to communicate their ideas, as did Yalom in his engaging psycho-philosophical novels ("When Nietzsche Wept" (1992) and "The Schopenhauer Cure" (2005)). But gut reactions were precisely the stuff of the existential psychologist's trade at the height of their era. May departed from Freud's therapeutic model in which the therapist listens to and ultimately directs the patient, leading her or him to new depths of understanding. May instead believed that psychotherapy ought to be a two-way interaction, which opens the possibility of growth and discovery on the part of both patient and therapist. Where's the room for experimentation and measurement in this?

Yet I believe that the bridge between the classical existentialists and the TMT theorists can easily be broached because TMT researchers have garnered the empirical evidence needed to support Becker's theory. Social psychologists believe self-esteem is a kind of buffer that shields the individual from anxiety that is built into our psychological makeup through evolution: when humans developed consciousness we became self-aware, and this awareness included the existential understanding that our lives are finite. Maintaining a positive attitude about ourselves, however, fortifies us against threats to the ego, and numerous studies conclude that people with high self-esteem are lower in anxiety than those with low self-worth (and vice versa); and this anxiety includes the fear of annihilation. Closely related to positive self-regard is acceptance by others in one's social milieu. The need for acceptance begins with feelings of vulnerability in infancy, and expands throughout life into ever wider social circles. Identification with the in-group, be it family, community, church, club, or nation, is a part of our highly social nature, but acceptance also demands conformance to the group's worldview. People thus feel protected, accepted, even loved, when they conform to the social standards promulgated by their peers. Pyszczynski and

colleagues from their book “In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror (2003),” state that the need to keep death anxieties at bay “...is controlled by complete immersion in the cultural drama that provides meaning, value, and, consequently, a sense of security and immortality.” As did Freud, they recognized that identification is a powerful defense mechanism. And TMT assumes that people counter this dread by other means as well; for example through belief in an afterlife, or by attaining symbolic immortality through procreation or by creation of works that will outlast us.

Social psychologists cleverly disguise the true purposes of their studies involving human subjects. In TMT this often involves temporarily manipulating one’s perceived self-esteem or increasing Becker’s mortality salience. Methods for experimentally increasing death awareness include showing graphic film clips depicting crushed automobiles and bodies following a traffic accident, or showing film of an autopsy. TMT researchers also portray others as possessing belief systems contrary to those of their subjects. For example, people with Christian beliefs may be presented with a composite description of someone who is Jewish or Muslim. By increasing mortality salience people rate those with different cultural values more negatively than they do those in control conditions.

Numerous experiments on raising death awareness have confirmed hypotheses generated by TMT. For example, it has been repeatedly found that increasing mortality salience increases out-group prejudice; also people with extreme political views were made to exhibit aggression toward those they believed held opposing views; white people with increased death awareness held more favorable views toward white racists; and in mock trials, real judges set higher bail for prostitutes when their behavior was seen contra their own worldviews when mortality salience was raised.

Differences in individuals were also examined. Those who are tolerant and open, in contrast to those with more rigid, fundamentalist views – and those who are more secure and have greater self-esteem – are least likely to need to resort to extreme

defenses in response to heightened mortality salience: their worldviews are more stable and secure.

Research supports a psychological model that looks like this: increased death awareness leads to anxious thoughts – but these are either consciously suppressed or rationalized. However, the resulting anxiety still persists unconsciously, raising defensiveness, so that worldview protectiveness, self-esteem bolstering, and other defenses are invoked; hence anxiety is ultimately reduced. Worldview defenses include derogation of the threatening persons, attempting to convert or change them to one's own belief system, resorting to actual aggression, or perhaps accommodating them by expanding one's own worldview, as when the mainstream culture of the 1960s came to accept many of the values of the hippie counterculture.

As to the application of TMT to the psychology of terrorism itself the author's state:

... prejudice and ethnic strife...including terrorism, are ultimately the results...of humankind's psychological inability to tolerate the existence of others who do not subscribe to their death-denying cultural constructions. (2003, p. 190.)

Can TMT then save Western civilization from terrorism? That's unlikely; but from the growing number of TMT studies, the authors draw some practical conclusions. These include teaching tolerance to reduce aggravation of tensions and reducing mortality salience by de-escalating threats to others. A reasonable path to smoothing hostilities lies in, first, granting the validity of viewpoints other than one's own, and then stressing commonalities rather than differences. Surely no one believes that the most extreme groups can be mollified – these strategies must be geared to more moderate factions. My personal conclusion is that, while it is important to keep the public well informed, it is unhelpful to frighten them unnecessarily – as through implementing increasingly severe, color-coded terror alarm levels and then selling them on the notion that “our” group will do a better job of

protecting them. Unfortunately, aggressive posturing (“axis of evil,” “with us or against us,” “we don’t negotiate with states that have connections to terrorism”) merely serves to increase the fears of our adversaries and to escalate hostilities. Both TMT and traditional psychology agree that diplomacy (but not appeasement) is a better strategy in human affairs than threats and demands; as Theodore Roosevelt claimed, we must “speak softly but carry a big stick.”

Researchers have advanced a theory of terrorism grounded in TMT, in part by analyzing the motivation of terrorists as well as the reactions of the terrorized. Space limitations preclude further elaboration, but one can easily see how the popularity of existentialism is likely to increase in proportion to the prevalence of further terrorism; for *terrorism is, potentially, both the new Cold War and the Threat from Within*. As this threat increases society could again respond with fears reminiscent of those due to the threats of nuclear war and communism, and a new Age of Anxiety will emerge.

### **Human Development from the Existential Point of View**

Existential psychologists seek to foster personal growth and development in adults. One way psychologists can help facilitate such growth is through psychotherapy. An existential therapy session is a mutual encounter between two persons, as it was with Rogers. Yet existential therapy is not entirely like Rogerian therapy; here the therapist does make interpretations when called for. And in the therapeutic encounter, both transference and countertransference are expected and desirable, as both therapist and client may grow and benefit from the mutual dialog. (Jung had earlier described his therapy method this way as well.) The ultimate goal for the client is increased freedom along with acceptance of responsibility for one’s life and actions. More than this, it is an attempt to help the client live a more authentic life: this means learning to tolerate the ambiguities and uncertainties of existence, and finding or creating a more meaningful way of living.

Of course people can develop themselves by other means than through psychotherapy, which can be seen as only one possible

route self-discovery. Rightly or wrongly Sartre was critical of psychology and of psychotherapy (especially psychoanalytic). But the road can be tougher without help. Think of Rollo May, for instance. For him it took a life-threatening illness to fully come to terms with what his inner angst and his personal search for meaning. But a better understanding of some of the factors that motivate us – especially the ways we perceive and react to the world, often without awareness (TMT again) – can help direct us in our personal growth and our quest for authenticity, even without formal psychotherapy.

### **A Personal Perspective**

I still feel a fondness for the classical existentialists in both philosophy and psychology, although after studying more of the lives of its pioneering figures I feel less attached to Sartre than I did in my youth and I am less awed by sophisticated-sounding prose unless these are substantively based. Heidegger, too, has always been problematic for me because, although his ideas have influenced generations of philosophers and psychologists, his embrace of Nazism in Germany before and during the Second World War – and so many other factors in his psychohistory – make him an enigma. Can one's life and works ever really be separated? In Heidegger's case I can only conclude that they must. Heidegger has been analyzed by countless scholars, yet the man behind the philosophy remains inscrutable. Perhaps I've been kind here – in the most damning condemnation of both Sartre and Heidegger I have seen, Clive James in his "Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts," wrote: "...Heidegger and Sartre, were only pretending to deal with existence, because each of them was in outright denial of his own experience, and therefore had a vested interest in separating existence from the facts. Will it ever be realized that they were a vaudeville act? Probably not." He also concluded that: "...Camus was struck with a congenital inability to be superficial." Using Heidegger's own words, then, one might conclude that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were truly more authentic than he in living their lives, and certainly they were less abstruse in their



writings; and the same can be said of Camus in comparison to Sartre.

The emergence of terror management theory is reinvigorating existentialist psychology with its keen insights into the dynamics of anxiety, self-esteem, prejudice, and terrorism. I believe that an understanding of these findings will enable us to better cope with the anxieties of our times. Yet I don't think these theorists can displace their philosophical predecessors – unless, of course, they can truly learn to “measure spring.” I have always taught my students that psychology is a science for the objective study of cognition and behavior. But after many years of this, I now think that psychology as a science must be equally balanced by a poetic, artful, and literary psychology, which imbues us with an appreciation for the fullness of the phenomenological, subjective, and essentially human side of existence. For this we need Henry as well as William James.

## **For Thought and Discussion**

1. As with Jung and Rogers, the existentialists were mainly concerned with adult development of the self. How does the existential therapy of May compare with those writers in terms of client/therapist interactions? And how different are these from traditional Freudian psychotherapy?
2. What in your opinion constitutes an authentic life? Can you name some people (famous or otherwise) that you regard as truly authentic? How about the opposite: someone who seems completely inauthentic?
3. What today do you think people today see as a great “threat from within” and a “threat from without”? How real are such threats? What kind of actions or policies might be used to mitigate such fears?

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