

# **An Assessment of the Compatibility of Existential Therapy with Christian Theology and Implications for Christian Faith-Based Therapists**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper discusses existential psychotherapy and its compatibility or lack thereof with the elements of Christian Theology that are central to faith-based therapists. The elements that were analyzed were: the existential problem definition – what was, from its point of view, the source of pain – as well as its means of counseling, the goals in the counseling process, and its approach to the termination. As each of these aspects was presented, they were also analyzed from the perspective of their compatibility with Christian Theology. The paper concluded with a reflection on the usefulness of this theory in practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Existentialism, Frankl, Yalom, meaning, Christian counseling, integration, values

## **An Overview of Existential Therapy**

The existential approach to therapy has its roots in the work of the existential thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as Soren Kierkegaard, Frederich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. However, existentialism as psychotherapy did not begin to develop until the 20th century, through the influence of people such as Victor Frankl, Rollo May, James Bugental, and Irvin Yalom. While existentialism (Rotaru 2010, 3-5) can not be described as a therapy in itself, it is a philosophical approach to life which does influence one's view of therapy. This doesn't mean that there is no such thing as existential therapy, for the four main creators of this approach were all therapists, and they used existentialism as their main theory. Their refusal to consider existentialism a type of psychotherapy alongside behaviorism, CBT, Gestalt, etc, comes out of their reluctance to translate the therapeutic process into rules and steps of treatment. Thus, if one should want to become an existential therapist, they would need to embark with the client on "a journey...that delves deeply into the client's subjective world" (Corey 2005, 38) and be ready to help the client discover freedom in finding meaning in the events of his life.

However, despite their discomfort with existentialism as a clearly defined therapy modality, they offer this definition in the words of Irvin Yalom: "existential psychotherapy is a dynamic approach to therapy which focuses on concerns that are rooted in the individual's existence" (Yalom 1980, 15).

## **Problem Definition**

For the existential therapist, a client's problem may take many forms, but the core is most of the times the same: people are searching for meaning in their life; they are not living their life well, and something is missing. The foundation of existential practice is an understanding of what it means to be a human being (Corey 2005, 136). Thus, they see humans as living in tension between being and non-being, according to May (Monte 2003, 425), struggling to find meaning in everything that happens in their life, including suffering. Many times, however, it takes an encounter with anxiety or suffering for them to enter in a crisis which would expose their thirst for meaning in life.

A man's meaning in life is not an absolute, but a personal reality: "the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day, and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment" (Frankl 1984, 131). Once one discovers their personal meaning, they are both free to accomplish it through choices that nobody can stop, and responsible to make that happen.

The proponents of existentialism as psychotherapy emphasize man's freedom to choose to be who he is, and reject a deterministic approach to therapy – for them, "being free and being human are identical" (Corey 2005, 141). This emphasis on man's freedom to choose regardless of the circumstances in his life originates especially in Victor Frankl's work, the peak of which is his book "Man's Search For Meaning". Frankl was an excellent subject for his own theory, because, as a Jewish prisoner at Auschwitz, he managed to survive and make sense out of his horrible experiences, due to his belief that, even in that situation, he still had the freedom to choose how to react and to approach what was happening to him.

In discussing the acceptable and unacceptable aspects of existentialism for a Christian therapist, one thing stands out as an element which not only can, but should be incorporated in the Counseling theory of a Christian faith-based therapist, and that is, the value the existentialists put on life as being something which exceeds the mundane task of mere "surviving". The fact that they talk about a thirst for something more than just "bread and circus" – basic necessities of life and entertainment – is potentially counter-cultural, but, amazingly, not unpopular, given the hunger our contemporaries have for spirituality of any kind. The very fact that they bring up the subject of meaning in life shows that there is a preoccupation with more than simply solving a client's problem – they're into solving people's lives. This resonates with the verse in Matthew 6:25 – "do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat and what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food...?"

However, if the fact that they even raise the question of the meaning of life is good and in accordance with the Christian Theology, the same thing can't be said about the way they answer that question, because their answer points to man and humanity as the source of meaning for life. When Paul talks about the center of the message to the preaching of which he had devoted his life, he mentions "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23) and says later in the same epistle: "let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ" (1 Cor. 4:1). His identity – and therefore his meaning in life is found in the sacrifice of Christ and in his response of offering Himself as a "bond-servant of Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:1). Even the philosophical writer of Ecclesiastes acknowledges that meaning is found outside of the human sphere: "the conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments" (Ecclesiastes 11:13).

In conclusion, the way the existentialists see the problem is, in a way, a breath of fresh air for the Christian therapist who is looking for a more holistic theory. Unfortunately, the answers offered by this therapy modality are only partially compatible with Christian theology. Both Existentialism and Christianity would agree on man's need and yearning for meaning, but they would disagree on where and how that meaning can be found.

### **The Goal of Existential Therapy**

Existentialism is based on premises that emphasize the discovery of personal meaning, personal freedom and one's ability to control life through his choices. Therefore the goal of counseling is that of helping one live his life with meaning and use his freedom to make choices which fulfill that meaning, thus not becoming guilty of wasting his freedom by not choosing.

When people come to see a therapist, however, it is because they are in some sort of a crisis – something in their life-system has gone wrong, and they are at a loss about what to do, and how to go about fixing their life so that things can be the way they were before. The experience of this crisis, however, involves an experience of anxiety, limitations and doubt, and so the goal of existential therapy is not only to help each client find his own meaning in

life, but to do so while helping the client “come to terms with the paradoxes of existence – life and death, success and failure, freedom and limitations, and certainty and doubt” (Corey 2005, 142). A therapist helps people come to sense with these things, by making people “more aware of themselves and their potential for growth through the expansion of their consciousness and experience” (Ryckman 1997, 518).

While existential therapy attempts to approach man as a whole, and deals with more than his separate problems, and while it aims at focusing man on something that is bigger than his problems – meaning in life – it lacks a major element which would have made it compatible with Christianity. Throughout the centuries and throughout different cultures, there were many messages attached to Christianity, and different aspects of the Gospel were emphasized in different times. However, there has always been one thing that has never been changed, and which is central to Christianity – the idea that man is not alone, and that meaning is not found within the human sphere, but beyond.

The Scriptures talk about a meaning that is found in knowing our identity as beings created “in the image of God” (Gen 1:26). The impact this statement has is huge: we have a purpose to our existence which transcends it, and our origin says something wonderful about our potential. To the Christian faith-based therapist, to rob anybody of such a perspective is to deceive them; even more, trying to help somebody find a meaning outside the meaning the Scripture talks about is to guide them towards failure, and ultimately, eternal death.

This is the biggest weakness of existential therapy, and the main reason for which a Christian could not embrace this theory without reservations. While a Christian could definitely benefit from the fact that this approach asks the right questions, the goal of counseling in existential therapy may be noble, but is not Scriptural.

### **The Process of Counseling in Existential Therapy**

The method of counseling practiced by existential therapists is based on their goal which is to “enable clients to realize that they are free to make choices about the directions of their lives and to help them make commitments that hopefully will assist them in becoming more authentic in their existence” (Stanton 1991, 289). However, though we will continue to talk about existential methods of counseling, it must be noted that they reject any notion of strict method or strategy, and claim that their approach is more of a philosophy which can be embraced by therapists of any theory. In spite of this claim, they do therapy in a way that is specific, and we will analyze a few of the characteristics of therapy as it is practiced by existentialists.

One characteristic of the existential method of counseling is that it is very client-oriented. Since their job is to help the client discover the meaning in their life, and since “the meaning of life differs from man to man” (Frankl 1984, 119) the client is the one who will come up with the solution to his search from meaning.

Secondly, existential therapy tends to be non-directive. This is partly due to their respect for man and belief in man’s ability to find meaning within himself, but also because they are very cautious about feeding any type of dependency in the client’s life. This is also due to their goal of fostering personal autonomy and of helping the clients make decisions for themselves.

In doing therapy, they will ask a lot of questions about the concrete background of the client, in order to understand their situation, but they always aim at getting the client to ask himself: “Who am I? Why am I here?” Furthermore, if the client shows dissatisfaction with his life, the therapist will ask questions such as “Why are you not pleased with your life? How would you like your life to look like? What are you doing now to take you in that direction?” Thus, if the goal of finding meaning might sound slightly abstract, their approach is concrete and practical.

Their approach is tailored in such a way that people are empowered to either change their circumstances, either to change the way they see things – their attitude – and thus make

sense out of their circumstances. For instance, Frankl talks about how he treated an elderly man who was very depressed about the death of his wife, whom he had loved dearly. When he asked the old man how would his wife would have felt if she had been the survivor of the two, he said she would have suffered terribly, at which Frankl pointed out that by his suffering, he was protecting his wife of this plight of her being left alone. According to Frankl, the elderly man did not need therapy anymore, because he had overcome his depression as he found some meaning to his suffering (Frankl 1984, 147).

But it is not only matters of life that the existentialists treat, but also clinical matters, such as obsessions, phobias, etc. In this respect, a method devised by Frankl has proven to be very helpful – paradoxical intention. This is based on “the two-fold fact that fear brings about that which one is afraid of and that hyper-intention makes impossible what one wishes.” (Frankl 1984, 135). In this approach, the patient is asked to embrace the very thing that he is afraid of, and to desire it to happen, only to discover that his compulsion or phobia is gone. This, in turn, strengthens the patient’s sense of personal freedom and encourages him/her to continue living empowered and thus finding meaning in his life.

Existential interventions have proved to be extremely helpful in cases where the clients are dealing with issues that are central to existential therapy, such as death, suffering and anxiety. Thus, grief sufferers, trauma victims, the terminally ill, those who are suicidal, all these can be helped by existential interventions.

One main reason for which existential therapy has proven so helpful in interventions is that therapists are used to discuss about things which are a part of life, but which make most people uncomfortable, such as death, fear, pain, etc. Even more, existentialists aim at giving people hope and a sense of control over their life, which is what they have been robbed of by their circumstances.

In light of their desire for the client to attain autonomy and personal control over his life, it is easy to understand why their approach is to aim for as few meetings with a client as possible, so that autonomy and personal empowerment would not be undermined by the very thing that is supposed to help them – the relationship with the therapist.

However, since the existential therapist pursues changing the whole person, and not simply a solution to a problem, termination is not an issue as urgent as it would be for solution-focused brief therapy, for example. This is why termination takes place once the client has not only asked and answered himself questions about the direction of his life, but when he has also proved that he has devised and applied practical ways of living his life in a meaningful way.

### **A Christian Assessment of the Existential Method of Counseling**

The existential method of therapy is hard to criticize, because it is quite simple and basic, and none of its main characteristics is in clear contrast with the Scriptures, so it appears to be a good option for a Christian counselor. However, there are a few aspects of their method which don’t serve the purpose of a Christian counselor, and which are not in harmony with Christian Theology, though not openly.

One of the problems with this method is the lack of any confrontational aspect. Since meaning is found by the client, and since the system of values he goes by is an internal one, and since the job of the counselor is to simply accompany and help the client find his own meaning, no existential therapist would ever bring up the issue of sin. The Christian counselor benefits from the words of the Ecclesiastes which remind him that “there is a time to be silent, and a time to speak” (Eccl 3:8), and it seems as if the existentialists choose to always be silent when it comes to pointing to the root of a problem as sin and when it comes to making moral judgments. While it is true that even the Christian counselor must always be extremely cautious when pointing out the sin in a client’s life, not entertaining even the slightest notion of an absolute set of values is something which is definitely not compatible with Christianity.

Another aspect of the existentialists' way of doing therapy that is contrary to Christian Theology is the fact that they are asking the wrong questions when it comes to helping a client find a purpose in life and draw strength to live out that purpose. While it is true that natural abilities and circumstances and personal desires may be pieces of the puzzle that show a Christian where he should be and in what to invest his life, the central piece of that puzzle is God's will for him and the leading he receives from Scriptures. Together with this, moral beliefs resulting from his allegiance to the Bible narrow the list of possible options – for instance, though one might say that meaning in life is found through her job as a medical doctor, having an abortion so that she would have time to finish her education is not an option for a Christian.

### **Integrating Existential Therapy with the Scripture**

Existential therapy gives a Christian counselor a lot of opportunities to deal with life's big questions in a way that is honest and brave, and, with the help of Scriptural truth, this type of therapy could have an eternal impact on a client's life.

One aspect of the integration of existentialist psychology and Christianity is knowing that when people experience any kind of crisis, they are more vulnerable, and, just as existentialists have noticed, they start asking questions. Though a lot of times they are not even asking the right questions, a Christian therapist can use existential methods to help his clients ask the right questions, but also receive the right answers. A practical way of doing this is by asking the questions borrowed from existential practice, which gives the therapist the chance to share some special answers from the Scripture with the client.

Issues such as grief, suffering, death, and fear can not be explained away with verses or even prayed away, but sharing the perspective of a hope that goes beyond this life, and of a God who has suffered the same pains, and introducing the client to the living presence of Christ, can, long after therapy is over, give companionship and supernatural comfort and strength. Thus, meaning is discovered by one outside himself, which can only be a source of peace and encouragement to a being that knows he/she is weak.

### **Conclusion**

After having analyzed existentialist therapy and after having examined it in the light of the Scripture, the inevitable conclusion is that, though, in an imperfect manner, it is a good tool for a Christian therapist. Indeed, without any Christian influence, it can only serve the faith-based therapist so much, but the method is flexible enough to allow anybody that would want to integrate Christian principles and teachings with existential methods (Rotaru 2012, 5-6) and insights.

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