

A true Person of No Status:

Notes on Zen & the Art of Existential Therapy

Abstract Zen calls an accomplished practitioner a ‘true person of no status’. ‘No status’ indicates the uncertainty of being thrown in the midst of an impermanent world where the search for power and prestige is futile. A ‘true person’ escapes such trappings and responds to life directly.

Although existential therapy on the whole emphasises intrinsic autonomy, lived experience and the desertion of the surrogate of status, it has relied for too long on Heidegger’s idea of *authenticity*, a notion which reinstates both the categories of idealist philosophy and monistic, totalitarian notions of ‘Truth’. Possible alternatives to the idea of authenticity are the notions of *openness*, *vulnerability*, and *integrity* (the latter understood as reluctance to give in to the compulsion of system-building)

Both Zen and existential therapy are sharply at variance with the discourse of manipulative authority that constitutes mainstream psychotherapy today and may provide inspiration for credible and organized acts of defiance in response to the demands of the market and the philistine pragmatism that dominates our current *Zeitgeist*.

Keywords the everyday, authenticity, uncertainty, integrity, openness, vulnerability.

The Tyranny of Authenticity

Dear Doktor Professor Heidegger, I should like to know what you mean by the expression “the fall into the quotidian”. When did this fall occur? Where were we standing when it happened? (Saul Bellow, *Herzog*)

What does it mean to be a “true” human being? The answer is not straightforward, given that current mainstream view on the matter has been influenced in existential therapy by Heidegger’s (1927) compelling, pervasive, yet detrimental notion of *authenticity*. Such notion has determined the way existential approaches to therapy understand to this

day what it means to be a true human being. Heidegger's concept of in-authenticity is the province of *das Man*, a sphere of avoidance, triviality, and hum drum mediocrity. It is an (involuntary) echo of Lukacs's (1978) more fertile notion of *Alltäglichkeit*, (the everyday). However, whereas Heidegger sees the everyday as falling short of the lofty authenticity of Being, Lucaks perceives it as being *colonized* by the greed and mechanization of capitalism. Where Heidegger's measure and criterion are metaphysics, Lukacs's notion is steeped in ethics, social justice, and the redemptive function of art. Lukacs's idea found fruitful development in Debord (1973), Lefebvre (1993) and more recently in Habermas's notion of *Lebenswelt* (life world, the lived experience of everyday life, opposed to what he calls the *system*, i.e. specialized culture controlled by experts) (Habermas, cited in Lefebvre, 1991, xxviii)

The main objective of Heidegger's 1927 work was to debase that imperfect ordinariness that, in Karl Lowith's words "falls[s] beneath the threshold of Heidegger's ontological vision" (Lowith, 1991, in Wolin, 1991 pp. 156-57). Everyday existence – what Heidegger calls the 'ontic' - is apprehended as essentially inauthentic. This is developed further through the dismissal of historic events and in favour of an abstract idea of 'historicity' (ibid), as well as the downgrading of phenomenology to mere "hermeneutics of *Dasein*" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 223). In other words, phenomena are taken into consideration not *per se*, but solely as reflections of Heidegger's synthetic notion of 'Being'. Similarly, human beings are taken into account solely as "mere emanations" of the divinity that is language. (Rorty, 1989, p 11). Heidegger's idiom is theological discourse devoid of divinity, yet still imbued, as Walter Benjamin pointed out (cited by Schroyer, in Adorno, 2003, foreword, x), with the glamorous "aura" of its absence. In doing so, Heidegger (a *Schwarzwald* redneck, in the words of Richard Rorty (1989), and ever suspicious of cosmopolitan agnosticism and finery) was in many ways the prophetic forerunner of that insidious trend that is now common practice in existential

psychotherapy: seeking shelter under God's imaginary shadow in spite of having done away with him in theory. A similar phenomenon is the unanimous employment of Buber's thought (Buber, 1969; Buber, 2004) as parameter for the therapeutic encounter in current therapeutic theory, all the while bypassing the inalienably theological content which is essential to the much-quoted "I-Thou" formula. Contemporary champions of 'diversity' and of the 'dialogical' face the same problem when unwittingly bending to their aims Lèvinas's notions of the *other* and that of *encounter* - both notions equally preposterous when taken out of Lèvinas's rigorous context, i.e., of his essential notions of, respectively, *God* and of a *separate self*. In fact, an in-depth appraisal of Lèvinas would bring us to welcome two highly controversial positions: Cartesian dualism (for only a separate self can envision *infinity* as well as externality or otherness) as well as a reassessment of education as *encounter* with exteriority rather than maieutics.

Heidegger's 'authenticity' is nothing but a simulacrum, a vacant totalitarian formula echoing the nostalgia for the power of a god that once was – before being slain at the altar of modernism and post-modernism. Such formula is filled with the tyrannical reverberations of a deity (*Dasein*, in Heidegger's language) that would save Europe and its culture from the double threat of the East - social equality, the alleged Soviets' menace - and the West - the money-orientated superficiality of America. It is mystifying how easily we continue to ignore the fact that Heidegger's notion of authenticity was historicized by the Nazis.

Openness, Vulnerability, and the Rotten Cherry on the Cake

The notion of authenticity is at variance with Rogers's liberative idea of a self who is truer, i.e., more open, more in tune with organismic processes. Harmonic correlation between self and organism makes a self more open, vulnerable, and empathic; it makes it more accepting of life's inherent uncertainty, more cooperative and creative. But it will

not make it more 'authentic' in the Heideggerian sense. Being authentic is steeped in what Heidegger (2001 pp 190-91) calls "fundamental ontology" - in his words "not merely ... a higher sphere ... or a kind of basement beneath ... [but] that thinking which moves within the foundation of each ontology" (ibid). None of what he calls "regional ontologies", least of all psychiatry and psychology, can ever afford to abandon such foundation. In order to be true, I must abide by an idea of Truth. To be authentic, I must comply with an idea of Authenticity. In order to be, I must fall in line with the idea of Being. Such capitalized abstracts - Being in particular - are somehow already endowed, according to Heidegger, with the attributes of 'care' or 'concern' (*Sorge*). There is no need for the authentic person to be empathic. Truth will take care of empathy. In the neo-idealist edifice built by Heidegger, love is left outside in the cold. Authenticity here is submission to an idea of 'totality' - in the meaning Lèvinas (1961) gives to the term - and it ends with superseding the more customary idea of subjectivity with that of Being - at first presented as an abstract concept, then gradually as something absolute and primary (Adorno, 1973, 113).

An uncritical understanding of Heidegger's notion of authenticity may have had and continue to have detrimental consequences in the practice of existential psychotherapy, if emphasis on *being* were to go hand in hand with a denigration of *becoming*, if tacit adulation of perfection (when dogmatically apprehended in the individual sphere as homeostasis, mental health, normality, integration, fully functioning state and so on) were to imply vilification of imperfection (defencelessness, openness, instability, or, in Genet's words, the *wound*), which in turns perpetrates estrangement and alienation.

We see such dichotomy ominously echoed in our contemporary obsession with so-called 'sincerity' and 'openness' in the world of politics (Runciman, 2008). The success of highly questionable characters such as George W. Bush and Tony Blair was partly due to the populist appeal of their 'sincerity' and the 'candidness' of their beliefs - they both

held sincere, even heart-felt beliefs that did not fail in creating devastation on a grand scale. But even the “straight-talking politicians”, Runciman suggests, “end up looking like hypocrites too”. And he adds: “This dance of hypocrisy and anti-hypocrisy, the endless round of masking and unmasking that is electoral politics, can be profoundly frustrating and debilitating” (ibid).

Now that metamorphosis of politics into farce has reached its peak; now that society on the whole *has* miserably transmuted into a never-ending episode of reality TV, so-called authenticity is the rotten cherry on the cake; the final ingredient putting the last touches on the ruthless manipulation and colonization of the everyday.

Existential therapy can provide a potential opening for the autonomous exploration of the human condition, for an independent study of *existents* that no longer relies on the totalising influence of abstract and neutral truths. At one condition: that it frees itself from the *ontological* trap, the prison of Being so skilfully assembled by one of existential psychotherapy’s undisputed tutelary deities and sacred cows, Martin Heidegger

I believe that existential therapy presents us with alternatives to a totalising idea of authenticity. And the same applies to Zen in relation to Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist practice: Zen is not a path of transcendence. Transcendence can be a trap if used as a way out of our baffling condition as humans. Zen thought and practice are too subtle, too ambivalent for them to be used just as another totalising route for transcendental consolation.

Integrity as the Refusal to give in to the Compulsion of System-building

There is no other source of beauty than the wound – unique, different for each person, hidden or visible, that every man keeps within, that he preserves and whither, he withdraws when he wants to leave the world behind for a temporary but deep solitude (Jean Genet, 1979)

I am suggesting that we need to turn to the twin notions of *vulnerability* and *integrity* as concrete person-centred alternatives to the misguided Heideggerian notion of authenticity.

What I found most striking in reading Howard Kirschenbaum's (2007) beautiful updated biography of Carl Rogers was not the confirmation of Rogers's therapeutic brilliance, nor the account of his efforts towards world peace and reconciliation (which I personally see as naïve attempts at establishing a misguided *pax Americana*). What moved me most was his vulnerability as an individual, his openness to the inevitable flaws of his own personality. A picture emerges of an ordinary person like you and me.

To be *vulnerable*, the Oxford dictionary suggests, is to be exposed to being harmed, to be exposed to a wound, for the origin of the word is the Latin *vulnus*, wound. Could it be that it is out of awareness of the wound, of one's own frailty, that genuine communication is made possible? Perhaps communication cannot proceed "from one full and intact individual to another" (Bataille, 1992 p. 19). Here we are a long way from Heidegger's notion of authenticity and its disdain of ontic imperfection and human 'triviality'. We are moving instead in the terrain of holistic acceptance, of *integrity* – understood as *wholeness* rather than adherence to *a priori* moral principles.

In Praise of the Everyday

An example that might illustrate this point comes from the world of cinema. Michelangelo Antonioni once said how he needed to follow his characters beyond the moments conventionally considered important, to show them even when everything appears to have been said. (*The Guardian*, 2007). Many of his films would present us with those revealing, awkward moments when the camera follows the protagonists to places where they no longer seemed to occupy centre stage whilst yet silently conveying

something of their humanity. Similarly with therapy perhaps: once the session is over, or just at the last minute, the client says something off guard, offhandedly, perhaps make a gesture, smiles or sighs, looks at the therapist ... and something important is revealed, something so powerful and obvious that hadn't entered the conversation during the official therapy time. What is trivial, and what is profound? Can a clear demarcation be established? I was horrified in finding myself recently, during group supervision, joining a chastising chorus that commented on an 'avoidant' attitude of a particular client and the 'triviality' of her material. How inauthentic of her! No depth at all! All that blabbering on about shopping!

The demarcation between triviality and authenticity is artificial. As humans, we will only be 'everyday', or not at all. We find a similar emphasis in the Zen Buddhist tradition. Zen is neither so-called contemporary 'spirituality' – i.e. flight into transcendence, fuzzy quest for the sublime (enlightenment, cosmic consciousness, nirvana and other such reified platitudes), nor the so-called 'new age', i.e. the self-help, reactionary money-spinning trade of the 'wisdom while u wait' variety. The Zen approach is also too subtle, poetic and ambivalent to be reduced to the disappointing literalism of "transpersonal psychology".

Ordinary Mind is the Buddha

Zen practice is rooted in the integration of (plain, ordinary) silent meditative practice with the ever-present existential challenges of that great spiritual teacher: everyday life. In the Zen tradition, ordinary mind is the Buddha. Buddha-nature is not an imaginary state that might happen to me in the distant future (if I've endured enough porridge and tofu, recycled tons of milk bottles, attended enough conferences and never got enraged if people stepped on my toe during rush hour on Monday mornings), but rather a waking up in the present to the imperfection and transience of this human life.

This very body is the Buddha, this very earth the lotus paradise. I am a Buddha, a ‘fully functioning human being’, the very moment I have the courage to embrace the full implications of my existential condition. Would such ‘fully-functioning’ being become manifest in the radiant distant future, or can it be accessed right now, through acceptance of vulnerability and commitment to integrity?

Zen does not offer a system, a cosmology, or an epistemology. Those interested in epistemology may be suffering from the *delusion and the compulsion of system building*. System building – the dogged pursuit of a comprehensive theoretical foundation to the baffling unpredictability, uncertainty and wonder of life-as-flux - is precisely Nietzsche’s definition of *dishonesty*, of lack of integrity (Bazzano, 2006, Rorty, 1989). To be interested in system building, one needs a considerable lack of integrity.

I am reminded of Kierkegaard’s mischievous remark in his Journal: commenting on Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, he wrote that if Hegel had labelled his book as a “thought experiment” he would have been “the greatest thinker who’d ever lived”. Since, however, he saw it as metaphysical, i.e. providing an imaginary *ground*, it was merely ludicrous (Bazzano, 2006, p 143; Rorty, 1985:105). Having integrity - i.e., being true to one’s imperfect humanity, is not conducive to system building. We build systems and theories in order to appease our anxiety. If we accept this hypothesis, then the role of existential theory is altered. From *foundational* it becomes *empirical* as well as *imaginative* (creative). No more striving to provide fictitious philosophical ‘roots’ to fill the void left by the rebuttal of the biological model, for such dismal exertion is fuelled by psychotherapy’s perpetual *physics envy*, perceived inferiority with regards to the world of science. Existential therapy might benefit from the inspiring works of the philosophers of existence. It does not require, however, philosophical ‘roots’ – i.e. foundational, metaphysical or even so-called ‘spiritual’ roots, for its endeavour deals with the fluid process of becoming, with the

everyday, with the humdrum splendour of the quotidian, with the immanence of imperfect human interactions and the sheer uncertainty of living-and-dying.

Existential theory would thus be enunciated as ongoing empirical research, understood as a compendium of transient marks on the fertile soil of the living organism, danced and sang as inspired response to the painful and luxuriant 'hands on' work with clients in an ever-changing social milieu.

As a Zen Buddhist practitioner of many years and an ordained Zen monk, I see the inalienably rebellious stance of existential therapy echoed by Zen's fierce commitment to open, fearless inquiry. Zen is not a system of beliefs. It is not a striving for the absolute or the sublime. Instead, it deals with the integration of the sublime into the everyday, with the opening of our doors of perception to the incredible wonder of what we normally consider to be 'trivial'. What is *bekannt* (familiar), is not *erkannt* (known) (Hegel, in Lefebvrfe, 1991, p. 1). While Hegel – and most of western culture after him – endeavoured to bend the familiar in order to make it known, Zen practice opens us to the essential *unknowability of the familiar*. Such stance is reflected in the refusal to buy into the 'power trip' of the expert, in tune with what Zen calls 'beginner's mind' (Suzuki, 2006), the freshness of the beginner that is lost in the experienced practitioner. One's commitment to existential practice qualifies one not as expert but rather as craftsperson and artist, in the sense that the ancient Greeks gave to the word (Agamben, 1994:72). This would mean that our work as I therapists belongs essentially to the realm of *poiesis* (poetic discourse) understood as *aletheia*, (unveiling that produces things from concealment into presence), rather than 'objective', mechanical production of expertise and equally mechanized 'answers' in an increasingly mechanized world. Not expertise, but deep commitment, that same absorption a craftsperson dedicates to the birth of her artefacts. Zen reminds us too of the delusional quality of man-made ideas of enlightenment and nirvana, as well as warning us against too much attachment to

canonical truth. A refreshing attitude, I believe, for any practising therapist. A Zen poem goes:

Awakening and Nirvana are posts to tether donkeys

The scriptural canon was written by devils

It's just paper for wiping infected skin boils

None of these things will save you

What is known as 'realizing the mystery'

Is nothing but breaking through

To grab an ordinary person's life

(Teishan, quoted by Batchelor 2008)

Person: Autonomy, Separation and the Condition of the Orphan.

What is a 'person'? When faced with this thorny subject, I found it useful to ask, after Nishida (1990), the following question: "Is there experience because there is a self? Or is there a self because there is experience?" This question is fundamental to both existential phenomenology and Zen. Here is how Nishida (1990) phrased it:

I came to realize that it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience. I thus arrived at the idea that experience is more fundamental than individual differences and in this way I was able to avoid solipsism (1990: 28).

Individuality is not 'solipsism' i.e. an isolated, romantically inflated notion of a lonely monad thrown in an alien and alienating world, but a notion that takes into account the interdependent nature of our being in the world. Paradoxically, we cannot be 'individuals' without our surrendering the delusional claim of being self-existing entities, and it is out of the awareness of our ultimate insubstantiality that a desire to be true to oneself emerges. In 1980 Rogers described an "emerging person" as one who trusts "the authority within" (quoted in Kirschenbaum, 2007, p. 511). He went on to say:

These persons have a trust in their own experience and a profound distrust of external authority. For that reason, they would not be valued by those who would put 'tradition above all'.(ibid)

Individuality (understood as independence rooted in the organism rather than ego-driven, delusional individualism) constitutes the teleological fuel of existential as well as person-centred therapy: the emphasis is on the organismic yearning to expand and grow out of cultural and tribal conditioning, thus actualising the unknown potential. In order to become what one is, Nietzsche would say, one must not have the faintest idea of what one is (Bazzano, 2006). This is the crucial distinction between mere self-actualisation and actualisation understood as the unhindered unfolding of organismic becoming. This also marks the crucial distinction between *ego*-therapy and *psycho*-therapy, between a pragmatically philistine M.O.T approach to therapy and one which addresses the inalienable concerns of psyche, or soul. The first approach dutifully responds to the demands of the market rather than the individual's aspirations. The second, more akin to the existential/humanistic frame, reasserts therapy as a rigorously ethical practice beyond the confinement of the ego: organismically embedded, endowed with a *telos* the unfolding of which are *unknown* and *unknowable*.

A 'person' needs to become first of all an 'individual', attuned with organismic processes, and who has moved away from mainstream denial and a life of quiet desperation. Were existential therapy to dodge the crucial issue of individuality, it would sell out its thorough-going mode to conformity and blind conventionality. For a form of 'belongingness' that were to arise without the preliminary teachings of solitude, without the rites of passage of individuation, difference, and psychological exile from one's conditionings, from one's tribe, is mere conformity.

Existential therapy is at variance with the mainstream placebo industry that goes under the name of psychotherapy and counselling because it recognizes in the existential approach a profound respect for the dignity of the individual and her autonomy.

To become an individual means *to depart*. The word 'individual' is etymologically related to the word 'widow', both words deriving from the Latin *videre*, to part (Edinger, 1972, p 163). Another symbol for individuality is that of becoming an orphan, of breaking parental influences. For Augustine, "to be a widow or orphan relates one to God" (cited in Edinger, 1972: 163). We need to realize the insubstantiality of the 'self', its fluid and contingent nature first. Once this necessary step is taken, and its full implications taken in, we can venture towards the task of self creation. We find similar pathways in Zen, in Daoism and in eastern non-dual practices such as Advaita Vedanta, as well as within the western anti-tradition (Bazzano, 2006a) which originated with Heraclitus (rather than Plato and Socrates). What these diverse strands have in common is a refusal to accept the substantiality of the self. The self is variously perceived as either non-existing or as fluid, and its solidity put into question. Rogers's view of the self as *process* echoes such notion of fluidity and is quite a different from both 'substantialistic' as well as 'relationalistic' views (Schmid, 1998: 41-42). Zen, Daoism and the western anti-tradition are not busy trying to dig up and embalm the dead words of great, long-deceased metaphysicians. *Substantia* is one of such words, the ancient metaphysical notion that there might be 'something' residing or inhabiting (*stantia*) underneath (*sub*) this 'mere' bundle of aggregates and contingencies, as well as the concomitant notion that there might be some deity/principle/demigod holding up the world and provide a prop to its bewildering uncertainty. A 'true person' refuses both facile link to a higher power and the flight into eternity.

A notion of individuality, of 'person' slowly emerges which is close to what Meister Eckhart has called 'intimate poverty' (Bazzano, 2006). In Zen, one who is ordained as a

monk in the *Tokudo* ceremony is said to 'leave home'. "In order to be able to play freely in the field of awakening- the novice monk is told - it is necessary to leave home". The text in the liturgy goes on saying, as the novice's head is shaven and the monk robe is being given to him/her:

There is nothing that can surpass leaving home for letting both body and mind become one with the Awakened Way. Cutting one's hair is cutting the root of human attachment, and if one cuts off human attachment even slightly, one's true body is immediately revealed. Changing one's clothing is stepping outside worldly delusion and realizing freedom of functioning (*Shuke Tokudo*, verbal communication).

No Status: Being No one, going nowhere.

No status in Daoism indicates our condition of 'straw dogs' in the face of adversity: the profound uncertainty of life, its transient nature, its groundlessness, a condition which manifests even very tangibly, as Adorno reminds us (2003, p 31), through *unemployment*.

In Ch'an Buddhism, which developed in China during the Confucian era, to have 'no status' meant being truly a *nobody*. What is emphasized is both intrinsic human dignity – not justified nor augmented by power, wealth and prestige – as well as the bereft, impoverished, and homeless state of our transient condition as humans. We will all die, no matter how many existential texts we read and how many humanistic conferences we attend. We will fade away and vanish. And yet, there is in all of us a tremendous potential for compassion and wisdom.

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