

Philosophy as Therapy

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There is much evidence that throughout its history philosophy has often included a therapeutic component. For example, Epicurus wanted, by means of his thought, to liberate humans from three kinds of fear: fear of gods, of necessity and of death. His argument that “death has nothing to do with us: when we are alive, there is no death; when death comes, we are no longer here” still impresses us and indeed may pacify to some degree.

When life fills with terror, humans often find the last shelter in the depth of their soul. Like a snail, a human being hides there. Yet still in this case philosophy can play the role of healer of the human soul. When scepticism calls us to refrain from judgements, this is legitimate first and foremost under the conditions of a social and metaphysical “earthquake”, when the being and everyday values recede underground. It is as if sceptical philosophy was saying: “Do not rush with your definitions. Things are too shaky and unclear.” It invites humans to use caution in the epistemological fog. In my view, such philosophy is much wiser than those self-confident ideologies that hastily provide a comprehensive assessment to the crumbling being.

Philosophy is deeply rooted in human nature. It is not surprising when *homo sapiens* is a philosopher; it is surprising when he is not, that is, when he does not ponder the nature of things. Unfortunately, many people lose this capacity. Wrapped in the standards of the modern solum, people are deprived of the joy of live thinking. Yet if human beings want to remain human, they should rather think. Philosophy is a condition for human salvation.

If philosophical knowledge about being provides humans with what Hegel called “windows into the absolute” (i.e., into infinity), then we can assume that it is due to this connection that an individual can acquire a new emotional-intellectual state. Perhaps individuals’ real connection with an endless essence of being liberates them from total loneliness, allows them to see other existential meanings and reveals the truth about the actuality of personal immortality. In other words, if you want to feel immortality, touch infinity in your mind.

On the one hand, thinking of an infinite essence of the universe may actualize an infinite essence of humans themselves and thus root them in the infinity of the cosmos. On the other hand, to think of infinity is to acquire the power of infinity, i.e., an infinite power. In short, thinking in terms of infinity fills us with infinity. Philosophy allows individuals to overstep the limits of the lived experience, transcends their Selves beyond daily events. Clearly this very human

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transcendence into metaphysical reality, into the world of essential relationships, ensures a therapeutic effect for philosophy.

From this point of view, philosophy can indicate where various forms of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy reach their limits by pointing, for example, to the restricted character of their methodological postulates. Besides philosophy is capable of assimilating the results of, for example, psychoanalytical observations in order to create a better theory of human spiritual life. Finally, we may talk about the possibility of a philosophical therapy, or a therapy of human mind through philosophy.

On the essence of human mind

Erich Fromm's studies tell us that a correlation with the surrounding world is an *essential* need of humans. This may serve as a proof of our assumption that the human essence (mind, soul, spirit) is seen in *relation to*, or to be more precise, as an ensemble of the (inner and outer) steady universal relations of an individual to the world (Fromm, 1955: 22–66; Omelchenko, 2005: 94–99).

For Max Scheler, it is due to their spirit that humans occupy a special position in the cosmos. The spirit is understood as a unity between our reason (“thinking in ideas”) and a sphere of feelings, emotions, will – i.e., as all the known mental activities of humans (Scheler, 1988: 31–95).

If any object essence is seen in *relation*, then we have a chance to catch the human essence, which is after all in our mind (soul). Next, let us turn to the components of the human soul.

Firstly, an individual is a representative of all humankind. An ensemble of the steady and universal relations between people makes up a fragment of human essence. If we try to clearly imagine an individual absolutely isolated from society, we would very soon be aware that such an individual would cease to exist as a human being. Such absolute loneliness is equal to nothingness. Thus an aggregate of the steady universal relations among living people, as well as between past and future generations, forms one of the components of the human essence (logos).

Secondly, there are steady relations inside the human body. These are neurodynamic regularities in the brain, mechanical, physical and chemical, physiological, genetic, and many other steady correlations in human corporeal organization. Such structures influence each other and form a general inner “pivot”, i.e., the human inner logos. Moreover, there is an interaction of outer and inner correlations, which is a condition of the human essence too.

Thirdly, the human essence includes relations between the human race and nature. An aggregate of the steady universal relations between society and nature makes up yet another fragment of the human essence.

From this point of view, one may represent thought (mind, soul, spirit) as a *relation* between the human being and the surrounding world on the one hand, and as a human *relation* to the self (i.e., self-reflection phenomenon) on the other. These *relations* become visible and audible due to human language. The human mind, then, is located not only in the brain but at the same time beyond the bounds of the brain, between the human body and outside reality.

Therefore the brain is not the only human organ of thought. Human beings also think with the totality of their creatureliness – all their senses, all preceding history and the experiences of nation, society, humanity. Thus, the human essence (mind, soul, spirit) is an aggregate of the (inner and outer) steady universal relations of an individual to the world. We may say that the human mind is an entelechy of the infinite cosmos: it is a microcosm, and so cannot be entirely determined by social institutions. The “human being is a microcosm” – this formula concerns not only the past but also the future.

According to this approach, the human soul is located not only within the human body but also beyond its limits: between the individual and society, between the individual and the cosmos. It turns out that the human soul has an extra-spatial and timeless character. It is in fact infinite, and thus incapable of final definition. The final, exhaustive definition of a soul would mean its death, at least in theory. The human soul's infinity constitutes its immortality. In other words, the human being includes an immortal principle. Thus, human nature itself presents a unity between the mortal and the immortal.

Let me advance two arguments in favour of the immortal principle of the human being. Firstly, the human spirit's infinity (immortality) comes to light in universal notions, in the philosophical categories above all – for example, the concept “human being” includes a concrete individual who is called by this name, and also something more general, since this term refers to the entirety of humankind: those who lived before us, those living today and those who will live in the future. In other words, the simple notion of “human” throws us beyond the limits of the concrete personality and reality and sends us to infinity. In fact, we cannot indicate the boundary that the notion “human” extends to.

Thus, thanks to their spirit, humans constantly deal with infinity already in their universal concepts as if, through them, they were touching it. This by itself would be enough to justify our consideration of the human being as an immortal creature. Our “touching” infinity (immortality) is common and routine, occurring every minute. For us this demonstration of and transcendence into immortality is so banal that we just do not notice it.

Secondly, real immortality is implied by the very fact of creation. But what is creation? There are wonderful words in Plato's *Symposium* (206e): “To the mortal creature, generation [birth] is a sort of eternity and immortality.” However, not only the reproduction of life but creation itself can be interpreted as a birth. Plato explains (205c):

All that causes the passage from non-being into being is a “poesy” or creation, and the processes of all art are creative; and the masters of arts are all poets or creators.

Indeed the birth of children, ideas, feelings, images, pictures, music, architectural constructions, various material things, all give us “a sort of eternity and immortality”. Therefore we may see creation as an expression of the infinite in the finite, as an immortal principle for mortal creatures. We continue to exist in our creations. Because of creation, people are, so to speak, godlike. Creation is a factor of human immortality, but the human being, as a creature only, remains forever a deficient being which is bound to suffer, to exist without a prospect, to degrade and be destined to inevitable death.

And so, in our projection of the human soul, we come to the conclusion that no final definitions of it can be given. The human soul includes two principles: the mortal and the immortal. The destiny of humans consists in developing their immortal principle, in acquiring, so to speak, godlikeness. This, in particular, is my answer to the question “what does it mean ‘to be’ human?”

Philosophy of human being and existential psychoanalysis

“I also wanted *to be* ... – that is the clue to my life.” These words from *Nausea* (1938) by Jean-Paul Sartre could be an epigraph for his project of existential psychoanalysis. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943) he noted that it did not matter whether this psychoanalysis really existed but it was important that it should be possible.

According to Sartre, “fundamentally man is *the desire to be ...*” The original project which is expressed in each of our empirically observable tendencies is then the *project of being*. There is not first a single desire of being, then a thousand particular feelings, but the desire to be exists and manifests itself only in and through jealousy, greed, love of art, cowardice, courage and a thousand contingent, empirical expressions which always cause human reality to appear to us only as *manifested by a particular individual*, a specific person. If it is true that human reality identifies and defines itself by the ends which it pursues, then study and classification of these ends becomes indispensable. Moreover, the best way to conceive of the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God. “To be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God” (Sartre, 1996: 302).

Obviously Sartre here assumes an excessive overstatement. Every one of us can gain “part of eternity and immortality” (Plato), so we may expect only a part of the divine. An individual does not have the luck to occupy the place of God and become a new Absolute. That would mean that he found a total infinity. Therefore, “the desire to be God” is a false goal. To direct one’s energies towards achieving a false goal is to waste one’s life. Thus, Sartre’s psychoanalysis is also needed in an adequate understanding of human being in order to get an authentic psychoanalytical interpretation.

But let us turn to Sartre’s postulate: “man is the desire to be”. Remember that Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) gave approximately the same interpretation of human essence. His work *On Eudaimonism* started from the following explanation:

Every creature which is living loves, even if only itself, its life; it wants to live since it lives; it wants to be since it is; by this, it wants to be only in a good state, healthy, happy ... (Feuerbach, 1995: 427)

In his view, the drive-to-happiness is a basic drive of every living organism that lives and loves, exists and wants to exist. Happiness includes all that concerns life, at least all healthy drives. So the deepest human essence is expressed in the sentence “I want, hence, I exist”. Here the words “I want” mean “I want to be happy and do not want to suffer”. Earlier John Locke (1632–1704), Nicholas Malebranche (1638–1715) and Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715–1771) had developed similar ideas.

Feuerbach argues that even suicide does not contradict the drive-to-happiness. The human acts in contradiction with the drive-to-happiness only for the sake of the drive-to-happiness, and such contradictory action is possible only when the evil a person seeks seems to him a good in comparison with another evil which he wants to remove or overcome by means of this action. He says a self-murderer wishes for death not because it is an end to his ills and misfortunes but because it is (even if only in his mind) the sole medicine against already existing or as yet just threatening and unbearable contradictions with his drive-to-happiness.

Drive-to-happiness is omnipotent; however it argues its omnipotence not in happiness but in misfortune. One may say the torments of existence entered my flesh so deeply, so sucked any joy and energy of life out of me that I know just one being, i.e., the being of torment, and one non-being, i.e., the non-being of torment (Feuerbach, 1995: 430, 431, 437).

So, in Feuerbach’s opinion, suicides and prostitutes act from drive-to-happiness. Obviously it must be admitted that criminals and destructive individuals also live in accordance with the principle of happiness. Every one of them could say, using Sartre’s words: “I also wanted to be ...”

In my view, we may obtain original results in our research into human behaviour using the principle of being or principle of happiness. And thanks to this principle we may obtain a great therapeutic and interpretative effect for human life and acts.

The problem of the meaning of life

Every being needs essence for its presence in the world, and human beings need meaning as their essence. From this point of view, it is easy to accept Frankl's theory of an existential vacuum as a factor that determines noogenic neurosis and suicide.

According to Victor Frankl (1905–1997), today's patient suffers greatly from the deep feeling of loss of meaning, which is connected with the sense of emptiness; that is why the psychotherapist talks about "existential vacuum". According to him, the sense of lack of meaning is more and more pervasive.

He suggests rather telling evidence. Here is one piece:

As for American undergraduates, statistics tell us that, among the reasons for death, suicides are the second after traffic accidents. And the number of the suicide *attempts* (that did not lead to death) is 15 times higher.

I was presented with the interesting statistical data obtained after the poll of 60 students at the University of Idaho who had attempted suicide. They were asked what motivated them to commit suicide, and this is what was found: 85 percent of them did not see any meaning to their life; and 93 percent of them were physically and mentally healthy, lived in good material conditions and in full accord with their families; they had rich social lives and had all the grounds to be satisfied with their academic progress. (Frankl, 1990: 26)

Another example comes from a letter from an American student to Frankl:

I am 22 years old; I have an academic degree, I have a great car, I am fully financially independent, and have many more opportunities in terms of sex or social status than I can realize. The only question I ask is "what is the meaning of all this?" (Frankl, 1990: 41)

As we can see, these students are doing well in terms of their social status. Yet what is out of order is the meaning of their existence. The absence of the essential, the holding core – which meaning is – destroys their inner and external being. This is very important: mental reality destroys physical (or corporeal) reality. It confirms the idea that existence is an autonomous mental structure that cannot be reduced to physical, social and other material forms of being.

Besides, existence is a specific reality that has its own life, its own dynamics and can be both constructive and destructive, not only for the meanings of human existence but also for other forms of being. We can talk about the phenomenon of mental activity (reason and feelings, rational and irrational components including intuition, will, love, etc.) when our mind has a *direct* influence on the external world and on itself. We can talk about *the existential field of personal-ity, the field of human mind (spirit)*. This mental space is a place for therapeutic effects.

Let us also note that the external factor of destructiveness finds its way through existential reality. For example, fear is an additional factor in our annihilation. Death, nothing "en-nothings" us through fear.

Existence is a conductor of meanings and understanding. In this connection, the sentence *primum vivere, deinde philosophari* may mean the following: first it is important to acquire an existential being, a life in spirit, and then to practise philosophy (and we should also be aware that philosophy itself participates in the becoming of our existence, inwardness). In other words, an existential experience is an important condition for philosophical reflection. Without the inner life of mind and emotions, it is impossible to philosophize.

According to Frankl, an existential vacuum impels many more people to ask themselves: “Why should we live?” In fact, the problem of the meaning of human life has become global. This means, in particular, that now not only professionals discuss this especially philosophical topic. Ordinary people also argue the everlasting issue. Questioning “Why?”, they turn on the light of reason, and that undoubtedly does them credit. Subsequent reflections lead to the sphere of metaphysics where everyone inevitably becomes a philosopher. So Frankl’s logotherapy is in many respects a philosophical therapy.

In my view, the problem of the meaning of life may have a positive solution if we treat the meaning of human life in the transcendent sense, i.e., in the connection with the absolute, infinity, immortality, in particular regarding the future consequences of our activities today.

An experience in philosophical counselling

Let me tell you about such an approach from the Mexican philosopher Yolanda Angulo Parra. She believes that philosophy has not always been a “serious” professional task, an issue centred on epistemology, nor a bunch of topics aimed at philosophers and understood only by them. There was a time when philosophers talked to common people, entered into dialogue with them, advised them about their lives and decisions, or even consoled them when in pain or suffering. One can visualize Socrates reclining on a couch in a symposium, or walking cheerfully while carrying on a lively dialogue with a friend. Or perhaps Seneca in solitude, trying to find the right words to write his *Letters to Lucilus* or his *Consolation to Helvia*. What was the purpose of these dialogical and writing efforts? Mainly helping others to reflect on their problems or situation and eventually come up with solutions so they could enter into a better state of mind and tranquility of the soul.

Angulo Parra explains that contemporary philosophical counselling, which is now professionalized in some parts of the world, can be regarded as a therapy, but also as advice, guidance or support. Anyone who seeks out a philosopher for counselling does so because of some sort of existential problem, has lost the meaning of life, is experiencing conflicts of value, all sorts of problems that do not fall within the category of pathology but nevertheless require another type of professional assistance.

The philosophical counsellor reinforces the individual’s autonomy, upgrading people’s reasoning capabilities, introducing them to philosophical research with the sole purpose of achieving an introspection process that will lead to a better understanding of the inner self. This was one of Socrates’s main goals. But self-knowledge is not the final end, for one must also transform one’s being to become a better person, morally speaking.

From Angulo Parra’s viewpoint, the last part of this investigation will be to gradually organize philosophical counselling for group or individual volunteers, for example, in women’s prisons all over Mexico, to help them understand their situation and provide the required philosophical means to deal with it (Angulo Parra, 2009: 291–292).

An active character of human existence

We proceed from the assumption that the human being is a microcosm, a child of *natura naturans*; therefore s/he is primordially not only a creature but also a creative being – *homo creans* – whose creative work is none other than a form of cosmic creation. In other words, human creativity is a cosmic phenomenon. S/he is capable of participating in the creation of macro- and micro worlds.

This approach finds its continuation in the idea of the activity of the human mind (spirit). Activity is assumed to be an attribute of personal spirit. This means that the personal mind does not exist without its own acts. As the life of a biological unit is impossible without its activity or movement, so the being of human spirit is impossible without its activity – the activity of reason, emotions, will and feelings. The life of our spirit is impossible without movement. Thus, mental activity may have both a creative and a destructive character.

Mental creativity finds its expression in different forms of spiritual creativity. For example, it is not only philosophical reflection but any cognitive act that can be considered as a *co-creation* of essential structures of the object studied. This means, in particular, that any judgement contains at least two components: first, a statement of a real state of things; second, a creation of this certain quality. Thus, if I find out that my son lied to me and tell him he is a liar, I have first offered a true reflection of the real situation, i.e., “my son is a liar”; second, by my evaluation I create or, to be more precise, I participate in the formation of this negative quality in my son. It is not hard to imagine the potential result if this verdict is repeated over and over again every day.

In my view, a ground on which the phenomenon of mental activity can be established is, so to speak, a similar essence of human mind and the surrounding world. The cosmos is an endless unity of discrete, sensually perceived objects with various relations between them. These relations are grounds for the notions of law, essence, logos. Human reason and language are also a form of existence and expression of cosmic logos. The human mind just as a *relation* is able to influence directly the world’s *relations*, i.e., the objective essence of being.

I believe it is not just thought, but feeling as well, that has a creative potential. And every mental act points in two directions: towards the object and towards the actually acting subject. This may mean, in particular, that we are becoming *that which* we are thinking and feeling.

In other words, if we learn to lie, we ourselves become liars and false; if we know truth, we turn out to be true and thus more real (and free, if we recall the biblical “truth will make you free”, i.e., freedom is an attribute of a true human existence). So truth is a factor in making man human.

Obviously it is possible to say in addition: we are becoming *what* we are feeling. In other words, we become *what* we want and desire, love and hate, *what* we recall and experience, *what* we believe in and *what* we dream about. Mental functions are so active that they participate in the formation of 1) the object of their influence; 2) the subject to which they belong; and finally 3) themselves. Thus it is possible to conclude that any mental influence has a triple character – each mental act has three sides to its real influence.

On the meaning of dreams

In this context, it is possible to talk, for example, about the triadic nature of dreams. Firstly, dreams demonstrate our potential. If you can *dream* of great things, then you are able to *make* them. “Serve the great if it is given to you”, a priest said to the Russian scientist Mikhail Lomonosov (1711–1765). If it is given to us, then we dream by manifesting this inner faculty. In a word, dreams allow us to know ourselves much better: dreams are an instrument of self-understanding.

According to the Russian philosopher Evgeny Trubetskoy (1863–1920), conscience is always evidence of something *unconditionally necessary*, a certain norm which should be followed by everyone, always and in all relevant cases (Trubetskoy, 1998: 64–65).

If we accept the philosopher’s discourse, let us draw a parallel line: a dream is also a message about something necessary. A dream is a guess about the deep essence of humans (of nation or society). From this viewpoint, a relevant sociological, cultural, psychological analysis of our

dreams (for example, like Freud's analysis of dreams) could turn out to be very useful for understanding essential human qualities. Dreams are a display of our potential and abilities.

Secondly, dreams create us and creatively transform us. Dreams push us to do things. Certainly dreaming, like faith, is strengthened by concrete works, and like faith dreaming without works is dead also. We become *what* we are dreaming about. If you are eager for realization of your dream, it will necessarily come true. *Dreams come true*. If we agree with the sentence "the things we are afraid of happen", then why are we not motivated by the saying "the things we dream about happen"? According to the American writer Richard Bach, "we magnetize into our lives whatever we hold in our thought ..." (Bach, 2004: 90).

Thirdly, dreams, by their very existence, strengthen and develop themselves, appear and form themselves, become more vivid and clear. Dreams (like any phenomenon of reality) are constancy-in-becoming. All this allows us to say that humans can and should dream, since the very fact of dreaming brings us closer to realization of our dreams.

According to another Russian philosopher, Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900), faith is "a message for those who expect and revelation of invisible things". (Soloviev, 1990: 531) This means, firstly, that faith is a message for those who hope, i.e., it points to those who hope for something, for what they believe or want to believe in. Secondly, faith reveals what is invisible and imperceptible from an ordinary view. In other words, faith is a super vision, an additional speculation, a mysterious (or magical, if you will) light with the help of which humans see what non-believers do *not* see. Faith gives us a new revelation of being.

To Soloviev's amazing yet heuristically precise characteristics one may add: faith has a creative and energetic potential. It multiplies the powers of the person who turns this faith on to him/herself. It multiplies the power of our cognition if we believe in our cognitive abilities. We win when we believe in victory. Faith transforms us and gives us extra power, and the absence of faith drowns us. Faith does not require great physical or financial costs, but at the same time it creates truly miraculous material changes.

This definition of faith is relevant to the definition of dreams as well. It is possible to state that dreams are messages for those who expect and revelations of invisible things. This means that dreams are messages for those who hope for a better life. Besides, dreams are revelations of the invisible, of potential: a primary crystallization of the future.

In this connection, the question of the correlation between philosophy and dream is rather interesting. A philosopher's dream will sooner or later be expressed in the word. Thus, in the beginning was the dream.

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