

BOOK REVIEWS

Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness

Emmy van Deurzen. (2009). Sage. Pb £20.99.

Happiness is, it seems, a perennially topical subject. The last few years have seen an upsurge in research and writing about happiness and well-being, much of it from the standpoint of positive psychology, and van Deurzen's latest book, "Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness", joins a growing chorus of recent offerings which question why the current pursuit of happiness is so widespread and so persistent, and whether it is somehow misplaced. It is, in its own words, an attempt "*to propose a philosophical exploration of what therapy and counselling can offer clients who seek to understand their own life better*"¹.

The book begins with some big, and familiar, questions about the meaning of our lives, and what it is that we want to accomplish during our time. Van Deurzen says, "*When people come to therapy they often indicate that all they really want is the achievement of happiness in their lives*"² And yet the therapeutic endeavour can turn out to be about many other things than the pursuit of happiness. Van Deurzen suggests that we need to decide, once and for all, what role "*therapy and counselling play in relation to human well being and happiness*"³. Is happiness what we should be pursuing, and what we should help our clients to pursue?

In the opening chapter- "*Opening Pandora's Box: Values and Beliefs in Psychotherapy*", Van Deurzen roots her investigation firmly in culture, ideology, mythology, belief systems and the role of hope, despair and success. She places this in the context of a shift from post-modernism to virtuality which she explores more thoroughly in the second chapter, "*The Good Life: Philosophy as a Guide to Therapy*". She argues passionately for the possibilities which the virtual world affords us, as well as the need to rediscover afresh the values and moral abilities which are relevant for us today. She ends with an existential challenge which will be familiar to those acquainted with her previous work- "*We have to learn to bring our own limited freedom into existence and let ourselves be touched by the challenges of reality*"⁴.

The term "*limited freedom*" is apposite, as this is a particularly interesting time to be writing about the conjunction of well-being and the therapeutic world. Even as the book was going to press last year, the economic climate took a considerable turn for the worse, and many people have been forced to reconsider their values in the light of a changed financial landscape; it remains to be seen how the emotional landscape has changed, and what kind of re-evaluations are taking place, as a result. Simultaneously, there are tectonic shifts occurring in the therapeutic