

Heideggerian Existential Therapy: Philosophical ideas in practice

Mo Mandić, 2024. Abingdon: Routledge.

Heidegger is not an easy philosopher to enjoy or agree with. Hermetically sealed in his own ‘special’ dead-white-male-Bavarian-philosopher language, Heidegger’s assertions can seem impenetrable and ambiguous, and are grounded in a phenomenology of everydayness that may not be everyday for everyone. And, we must not forget, he was a Nazi Party member.

Still, he did give other dead-white-male-European philosophers a helpful shake-up (Descartes, Kant, Hegel) and reminded us of the wisdom of some even-deader-white-European-male philosophers (Parmenides, Heraclitus). He even inadvertently helped some now-dead-white-French-male-and-female philosophers to come up with more impenetrable writing (Sartre, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas) and thereby catalysed a philosophically ‘Continental’ tectonic rift that opened the way for a generation or two of mostly-now-dead-post-modernist philosophers (Lyotard, Derrida and beyond) to riff on or rebel against.

Along the way, he also offered people working in practice with people (like therapists) a different perspective on human living than the technocratic ‘calculative’ scientism fostered by medicine, economics and horology. Experience was restored to primacy over a detached observational analytic and mechanistic psychological re-engineering. Existential therapy owes Heidegger a debt, however begrudgingly, for helping to loosen therapy from the grip of mythologists and scientists in the early twentieth century.

In *Heideggerian Existential Therapy*, Mo Mandić sets out to offer “a detailed account of Heidegger’s characterisation of the human being, in order to show how this can both inform and also establish a certain basis for therapeutic practice” (p1). His account draws almost exclusively on his reading of *Being and Time*. I am not aware of any other book aimed at specifically at therapists that focuses on a detailed discussion of *Being and Time*, though there are many other published introductory guides and commentaries on it.

Mandić also suggests that he wants to correct some misconceptions lingering among the great variety of ‘existential’ therapists writing about their field: “This is no easy task, I readily admit, but the implications [sic] of not doing so is that existential therapy remains firmly entrenched in a Cartesian framework” (p19).

After some introductory material, Mandić sets out to describe Heidegger’s intentions in asking about the meaning of being. The early sections of the book give a brief outline of many of Heidegger’s terms and methods – all the usual suspects: Dasein; ontic/ontological; facticity; *existentiale*;

phenomenology; hermeneutics; and so on.

Following this, most of the book addresses three topics: Heidegger's conception of Dasein; its way of being; and the challenges and disruptions it faces. This starts with the context of earlier conceptions from Descartes and Husserl, setting the stage for Heidegger's critiques of their thinking and showing what is distinct about Heidegger's ideas of human being, such as being-in-the-world, being-there and possibility. Mandić then goes into a deeper explanation of Dasein's way(s) of being, including authenticity, thrownness, care, moods, understanding, being-towards-death and temporality. And last, in terms of challenges, the book considers broad world and temporal breakdowns, as well as some of the specific breakdowns we might experience in our *existentielle* manifestation of Dasein's various *existentiales*. It also looks at what it might mean in the context of therapy to transition through a breakdown, and contrasts this with a non-Heideggerian view of breakdowns (specifically, that of the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott).

The final part of the book revisits Heidegger's ideas, as the basis for a therapy that tries to use his intertwined methods of phenomenology, formal indication, hermeneutics and existential analysis. In working phenomenologically, Mandić takes an example situation (thinking you have driven your car into a dog which turns out to be a paper bag blown across the road) and considers how a Husserlian analysis and then a Heideggerian analysis might proceed. In applying formal indication, the example of a mood – 'resentment' – is used to illustrate moving from a general understanding of the term, as a provisional linguistic placeholder, into a more concrete exploration of 'how' the phenomenon is structured for the client. Mandić does not give any example of applying Heidegger's hermeneutic method, perhaps not least because it is not "a mechanistic or mechanical or formulaic approach... [but] remains open to whatever comes forth of its own accord, as a free movement" (p150). And for existential analysis, Mandić suggests that the therapist identify the *existentiales* manifested in the client's ways of being; be with the client as disclosedness or openness (without theorising); and face disharmonies with clients in 'historical disclosing'. He also offers an approach to working existentially with dreams, by inviting the client to "make of their dreams what they will" (p161).

Overall, my feelings about this book are mixed. On the one hand I found it a useful revision of *Being and Time* that took up a lot less of my own being and time. I was reminded of aspects of Heidegger's thought that I have forgotten or neglected over the years since my own training. If I were I back on that course, I think I would find this volume useful as a guide to Heidegger's *magnum opus*. (I did wonder if the publishers could include an index based on the numbered sections of *Being and Time*, pointing to the relevant pages of this book, for easier cross-reference.) The occasional

pointers to therapeutic implication(s) or examples were also helpful to give some ontic life to Heidegger's ontological abstractions.

However, I also would have liked more from this book. First, I wanted explanation in even plainer 'everyday' language. Second, I had hoped for much more about application in practice.

While translating Heideggerese into anything else is certainly to commit a gross philosophical foul in Heidegger's eyes, it might allow his ideas greater osmosis into the profession. Mandić warns early on that this "new language" (now a century old) "jolts us into a different way of thinking" (p20). Yes, but everyone does in fact translate Heidegger's language – explicitly or tacitly – in their own minds if not also in the many texts and courses that try to make sense of his work. So, in terms of providing a translation, the foul has already been committed many times over. The publisher's blurb on the back cover suggests the book unveils Heidegger's thinking "without presuming any philosophical background" for a range of practitioners including coaches, consultants and so on. However, I think much of the book will only be accessible to those already engaged in close reading and guided discussion of *Being and Time*. More of the plain English of *Das Man* might have been a good provisional 'formal indication' of what Heidegger is saying.

Secondly, most of the book, even in the sections about practice, is given to explaining Heidegger in theory. I wanted more, and richer, examples or cases from the *existentielle* world of therapy. As Mandić rightly indicates, it would be very un-Heideggerean to provide fixed practices or methods. But in my view, it would be entirely Heideggerean to provide descriptions of what 'has been done' or 'could be done' in the pursuit of a Heideggerean existential therapy (suitably anonymised or fictional). The book has a small amount of this, but not enough to merit the 'ideas in practice' subtitle. The book introduces two promising invented cases at the start but makes little use of them beyond brief general outlines of an existential approach. It would have been helpful to learn further about the possibilities of Heideggerian approaches with these two clients to illustrate key points throughout the text and, most of all, in the final part on existential therapy.

In summary, I think the book would be useful for trainees on a substantial existential therapy course in which reading Heidegger's *Being and Time* forms a significant element of the course and is supported not only by ongoing discussion of theory, but also by supervision to offer suggestions and feedback on practice. Without that combination of discussion and supervision, it is difficult to see how other practitioners would be able to incorporate much of this account of Heidegger's intricacies into their work.

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