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Invitation to Existential Psychology: A Psychology for the unique Human Being and its Applications in Therapy

Bo Jacobsen. (2007). John Wiley. £24.99

This book is an invitation to a field that needs development: existential psychology. This is its main virtue - inviting the reader to enter into an area fundamental to the application of theories and phenomenological and existential concepts, i.e., a field in which great questions of life are dealt with. The reader will ask: '*is that it?*' And then ask why such an invitation is so important. It is because the author deals with an aspect that requires increased in-depth development: the systematisation of an autonomous discipline – existential psychology. More than this though, the book stresses a number of fundamental aspects that have not been given due attention by the scientific community:

- There are three existential disciplines that inter-relate, philosophy, psychology and psychotherapy, but each one has its own field of application.
- Existential psychology provides the link between philosophy and psychotherapy, and thus avoids the usual gap between philosophy and psychotherapy.
- Existential psychology is a field of psychology that includes a set of concepts and theories on Man and the world that enables suitable scientific research to develop.
- Existential psychology provides the study of fundamental issues of life, maintaining a scientific rigour, but excluding the epistemological reductionism that sometimes prevails in empirical psychology.
- The phenomenological method is one of the more efficient instruments to help establishing scientific research of a human nature.

The book has a clear objective, it is '*an attempt at developing a firmer framework for the discipline of existential psychology*' (p.x) The three features that distinguish Existential Psychology from Humanistic Psychology, from Positive Psychology and from mainstream Psychology are as follows (p.21):

- *It focuses on essential life dilemmas and the big questions of life.*

- *It emphasises both the positive and negative dimensions of life.*
- *It applies mainly phenomenological research methods, studying human life from within.*

Jacobsen refers in a linear and clear way to the concepts and theories of a set of international authors (the book includes an appendix with a list and a short biography of 23 acknowledged authors), and divides the book into a system of six basic conditions or dilemmas of life. These are ontological conditions that every human being has to address and they are presented as opposite poles:

- Happiness vs Suffering
- Love vs Aloneness
- Adversity vs Success
- Death Anxiety vs Life Commitment
- Free Choice vs Obligations of Your Life Reality
- Life Meaning vs Meaninglessness

One of the positive aspects of this book is that the study of these dilemmas avoids the normal – pathological dichotomy. In this sense, the book is of paramount importance for psychotherapists. No less important is the fact that the author gives equal value to each of the poles and presents diverse theoretical contributions accompanied by descriptive reports given by people who share their experiences, and also of examples of research studies carried out on these issues. For example, in the case of Death Anxiety, three theories are presented, those of Irvin Yalom, of Gion Condrau and of Rollo May. This is followed by a study carried out by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross who interviewed two hundred hospitalised terminally ill people, and then there are some first person reports. The final part of the chapter, after reviewing the theory, asks how is it possible to help someone with a terminal illness, and this gives the text a more practical dimension since it is about intervention.

With this pedagogic strategy the author attains his major objective, that of presenting existential psychology in a clear, systematic and coherent way. In this sense, the book is recommended not only to students and professionals of psychology and of existential psychotherapy, but also to others who are interested in social and human sciences.

Overall the book places an emphasis on the existential rather than the phenomenological dimensions. This question is important at different levels. Firstly, phenomenology has made some specific contributions to psychology. Not just in terms of the method but also some concepts that are highly psychological. For example, the concept of intentionality developed by Edmund Husserl was a breakthrough in psychology which enabled a new theory of consciousness that went beyond the limitations of a strictly empirical vision to be presented for the first time. Another

example also from Husserl is the theory of inner-time consciousness that enables us to understand how a non-empirical object that appears repeatedly and that has a temporal dimension, can be correctly perceived by consciousness. An example of this is a melody. Inner-time consciousness theory serves not only to explain how temporal objects are presented to consciousness but also demonstrates the crucial contribution that phenomenological concepts have made to psychology. In this way there is already a set of themes and theories that have been kept in a strange silence within the community of phenomenological-existential psychologists and psychotherapists which deserve to be brought again into the light of day. These theories are remarkable contributions not only to existential psychotherapy but also to psychology as a global discipline because they address themes such as memory, consciousness, body, other, perception, temporality and the self. These important themes in mainstream psychology are also of great theoretical and practical value to existential and phenomenological theories.

While these themes may be useful to the community of psychologists and existential psychotherapists they may also have contributed to the exclusion of existential psychology from the global scientific community. Perhaps this position is due to the fact that existential phenomenology is an area of knowing that is critical of the scientific reductionism of the western world. But, a critical vision should not be synonym for exclusion. It is precisely because it has a different point of view from other psychological theories that existential phenomenology must actively participate in the dialogues undertaken in the international community. After all, the tradition and history of existential phenomenology is full of examples of active participation in the discussion of scientific and academic issues without the separation of Man from the world of life.

As the author took care to highlight, this book is an invitation and a contribution that requires further developments. Furthermore, it would be difficult to include in a single book all the theoretical, scientific and common sense contributions to the major questions of the human condition. But, the great merit of Bo Jacobsen's book is to remind us that we need to revitalise the interest in existential psychology; that the discipline is important not just that we can better understand the questions of life but also that it is important for the establishment of existential psychotherapy.

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