

An Existential Approach to Human Development: Philosophical and Therapeutic Perspectives

Martin Adams (2018). London: Palgrave

The audacity of Martin Adams' attempt to rummage in the literature and sift his way towards a serious look at human development from an existential-phenomenological perspective will not be lost on anyone who practises or researches in this area. Many veteran existentialists have spent a lifetime veering away from anything which bears even the possibility of being mistaken for a model, deterministic or otherwise. But Adams has carefully adopted the word 'approach' in his title, just as I have carefully chosen my first words – 'attempt', 'sift his way' to describe the line he has taken in this fascinating book. For what he is dealing with is the near-impossible – temporal linearity does not exist in existentialism, so he is having to invoke and illuminate something which is hidden, unseen. This audacity would sit precariously with somebody who had come to think about the subject only recently and for the purposes of creating a book. It is obvious, however, that Adams has been at this like a dog with a bone for decades and has tussled with it from every standpoint. What's more, he appears to be an almost lone figure in this pursuit.

While the incompatibility of existing psychological developmental or life-span models (from Freud and Erikson through Maslow and Fairbairn) with the existential approach would put most people off, the truth is that existentialists too need to have access to a way to explore human existence from birth to death, with all that comes between. They also have a responsibility to debunk static, one-size-fits-all, determinizing perspectives, because at best these can restrict the horizons of both psychotherapist and client, and at worst be damaging, causing people to believe there is 'something wrong with them' if they do not conform in terms of age matched with prescribed stage.

Adams first presents a chapter on extant developmental theories, beginning with myths which, he says, help us 'to make sense of the past, to inform present understanding and to have some predictive power' (p 3) and introduces the theme which runs throughout the work – that where history aspires to have 'objective scientific truth', myths have 'narrative truth'. He goes on to encourage the use of myth as a verb rather than a noun – 'to myth': 'since this emphasizes not only the human action involved in making sense of life but also that [myths] can change' (p 4). He takes us deftly through the great storytellers – from the Assyrian epic *Gilgamesh*, through the work of Sophocles, Ovid, Dante, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Rousseau, Blake and Wordsworth to Freud, Jung and right up to none other than the Nobel maestro himself, Bob Dylan.

He tells us that, influenced by the musings of both Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, his book will deal with such questions as: What is it that develops, from what to what and how does it happen? What do we mean by the word 'develop'? Very different questions then, to the ones normally posed in developmental models. While he does supply a checklist of the number of stages provided by certain psychologists: two (Klein), three (Fairbairn; Grotstein and Rinsley), four (Winnicott), five (Freud; Maslow), seven (Jung), eight (Erikson; Marcia) or more (Sheehy; Levinson), he does not describe some of the best-known and most-used developmental models from psychology (I am thinking particularly of Erikson and his psychosocial crises) which I think readers might have found useful as an anchoring point and a contrast.

Adams turns, intrigued, to both philosophy and novels as creative providers of a truth which cannot be found in statistics: 'The task of the novelist, the philosopher and also the therapist,' he says, 'is to facilitate reacquaintance with something both known and unknowable: life' (xiii). He therefore pays as much attention to the novels and plays of Sartre, Camus and Beauvoir (autobiography too in her case) as to their philosophy, quoting Laing's 'We do not need theories so much as the experience that is the source of the theory' (1967: p 11-15) or Picasso's 'Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth'.

While laying the ground, Adams is also keen to paint the wider context: 'I have come to prefer the phrase "life cycle" rather than "life span" or "life course" because it contextualizes life [...] within both human time and eternal time' (xvi) and he adds that it is a human conceit to view life in terms of the individual – all life on earth is interdependent. Stages, he complains, once conceptualized are taken as human fact but are, in reality 'an artefact of the research method and cultural assumptions [unable to account for] the ability to choose, to hope and to love and the need to live with meaning and purpose' (p 11). Certain concepts, all too prevalent in our discourse, such as: memories as unchanging and stored; self as something true and constant; the unconscious as a place with contents; or the past as having gone, are, he says 'category errors' and only make it superficially easier to think about the life cycle events' (p 19).

Finally, he has an ambition: that this should be a 'reader's' and not a 'writer's' book. Writers' books are well researched and the hard work is presented. Full stop. Readers' books will involve readers in the process – they must fill in the gaps, apply material to their own lives or to those of their clients or family, muse, add to, disagree, argue.

Having laid out his pitch in Part 1, Adams completes the structure of his book with two more parts. The second expounds the work of six major existential philosophers: Kierkegaard ('life is lived forwards but understood backwards'), Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir which, with a welcome jargon-free (as far as possible) clarity explains the

main philosophical ideas of each, and provides a section on how their work specifically relates to the various transitions which humans pass through from birth and on their way to death. Part 3 reflects on the implications these have for therapeutic practice.

It is Kierkegaard's concept of 'the leap of faith' which lays one of the foundation stones of both existentialism and that which moves us from one place in time and space, to another. This movement can only occur after immersion in the lived paradoxes, dilemmas and contradictions of current everyday life, Adams tells us, and that Kierkegaard's concept of human development is 'not biological; it is a spiritual process of continual becoming' (p 36). He gives us Kierkegaard's three stages of development, the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious, which, while not rungs-on-a-ladder stages, do contain a certain hierarchy, each one being enveloped, retained and changed by the addition of the more advanced ones. Adams likens Kierkegaard's concept of 'unreflective' aesthetic search to addiction to alcohol, drugs, sex or shopping, activities which avoid personal challenge, chosen simply to stave off boredom, something Kierkegaard calls 'crop rotation'. The self, according to Kierkegaard is not discovered by the leap of faith – the leap of faith itself in the face of doubt reveals it.

Nietzsche's loss of faith, by contrast, led him to seek the possibility of transcendence without religion. It is he who 'anticipates the phenomenological concept of reflexivity' (p 49) because he recognizes an intrinsic connection between the philosopher's own moral purpose and his writings. Since we humans can only see things from where we are, reflexivity is the sole way to 'save our perspective from being a solipsistic delusion' (p 49) Adams tells us, while introducing Nietzsche's three metamorphoses. In the analogy of the camel, the lion and the child stages, we see that development is neither guaranteed, nor dictated by age, but rather is the stretch from naivety to maturity. The camel is passively obedient; the lion, angrily, in reaction to the first stage, asserts its fundamental independence; and the child represents self-sufficiency, independence from the herd, 'free of the reactive obligation to say *yes* or *no* [...] the turning point of evolution is not between animal and man, but between man who is still an animal, and man who is truly human' (pp 58-9). Adams' description of Nietzsche's stages makes for invigorating reading, highlighting that the existential approach to development involves challenges, risks, understanding, choosing, overcoming – all playing the core roles, as opposed to physical or cognitive growth.

Heidegger is well known on authenticity, anxiety and, of course, on what Being itself actually is, but Adams focuses on his view that death is not something to come but something present throughout life (we are beings-towards-death), and says that one of the keys to human development lies within the question: how does our understanding of eventual non-being change as we go through life? Although Heidegger himself does not do much

distinguishing between human ages, Yalom (1980) has observed that small children are fully and often fascinatedly aware of death; older children, however, appear to lose their curiosity (death denial defences have become more established); and then we are all familiar with adolescent risk taking and interest in the Gothic. Here is the existential-phenomenological developmental meaning of death awareness and what that means for experience, not chronology.

Sartre is concerned with 'our original or fundamental orientation to the world' (p 98) and Adams prefers 'original' with its implications of 'first' to 'fundamental' which suggests something basic or quasi-genetic. It is upon this 'original project' that choices are made and 'what we come to think of as our personality is no more than a summary of choices, actions and decisions consistent with our original project' (p 98). Sartre is one of the few existential philosophers to seriously consider childhood (he had more than a passing interest in Freudian analysis) suggesting that the extent to which a child is valued by significant others is crucial in determining whether she or he is likely to become an active or a passive agent – in other words one who takes responsibility or not.

Merleau-Ponty is the ultimate explorer of 'how we get a sense of being a body in space' (p 114). Embodiment underpins our entire existence and Adams is particularly good at communicating Merleau-Ponty's 'primary undifferentiation' – a concept enlightening for those who struggle in a binary way with the concept of nature versus nurture. Development is a shared process between child and caregiver – a cumulative dynamic process where 'the infant is relating rather than communicating because there is no distinct and perceived other to relate with' (p 118), and the caregiver is, in tandem, being born as a parent or caregiver. Adams also discusses language acquisition in this section, imagination, incompleteness, loss, perspective, narcissism, sympathy, empathy, love, masculinity, femininity and even pregnancy. He and Merleau-Ponty together remind us how wide a subject is human 'development' and that at some earlier point simple consciousness must transform into self-consciousness, as part of how we grow.

Finally, Simone de Beauvoir is of course known for declaring: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' so gender is an obvious place to land with her. However, Adams is struck by how beautifully she writes about old age, and although he does consider her writings on gender, childhood, adolescence, objectification and motherhood, he comments that her work on ageing is often side-lined or ignored (see Adams' article on page 80). He is clearly mesmerized and moved by it, something which shows through in his writing of this section. '*La Vieillesse*', he says, is 'a passionate and encyclopaedic work that is both singular and also universal', and that just as with women, Beauvoir captures how old people often experience themselves, as 'other' capable of only 'passive deterioration', as opposed to adults who are seen as 'transcendent and active subjects' (p 157).

In the third part of his book ('Implications for therapeutic practice'), Adams divides his sub-headings into: 'Working with: "age", "young(er) people"; "old(er) people"; "truth, narrative and the sense-of-self"; "beginnings and endings"; "embodiment"; "randomness and chance"; "adversity"; "the skills learning process"; "love"; and "freedom, responsibility and choice"'. We are not provided with categories such as 'infant', 'child', 'adolescent', 'young adult', 'mature adult', 'old age', etc. but make no mistake, every single one and many more of these life-transitions are covered, because the sense of self has to be established over and over again and is reflected through all of the above.

So, did the author achieve his ambition – is this a 'reader's' book, and if so, which readers is it for? It was certainly this reader's book, although I would have loved to have seen specific examples of the relation of some of the mighty ideas in it to practice. It is a churlish longing, though, because we were warned early on that part of our task as readers was to do our own relating – perhaps a sign of my lack of responsibility in wanting it all handed to me on a plate, and the criticism is not true to the comprehensiveness of this third section. My clients', my own, and my loved ones' lives at all their different stages were vividly present in the pages, with constant reminders of the existential givens and concerns we must live with – for instance that beginnings and endings are important in therapy because that is what life is made of – our natural condition is change: 'in existential therapy we do not work on change; we work on stopping stopping. We work on resistance to change' (p 182).

Anyone who finds change and transitions difficult or frightening (and I think that is all of us) will enjoy and learn from this tremendous book, and the possibility of viewing development as something which happens at a particular 'time' of life and in almost the same way for every person, regardless of culture, outlook, choices and history, will fade into the vastness.

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References

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Yalom, I. (1980). *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books

Psychotherapy for the Other: Levinas and the Face-to-Face Relationship

Kevin C. Krycka, George Kunz and George G. Sayre (eds.) (2015).
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The basic premise for the book is to find an answer to a question asked of one of the authors, George Kunz, by Emmanuel Levinas himself: