Applied Existential Psychotherapy

Applied Existential Psychotherapy (AEP) is a psychotherapeutic approach and philosophy developed by Betty Cannon. In an outline of AEP (Cannon 2011), she lists six influences: Gestalt Therapy, Psychoanalysis, Rogerian Non-Directive Therapy, Body-Oriented Psychotherapy, Trauma Work, and Existential Philosophy (especially Sartre). One can make the observation that the influence of Existential Philosophy in this approach comes from several directions.

Gestalt Therapy is a therapeutic approach and philosophy rooted in existentialism. “The basic concepts of gestalt are philosophical and aesthetic rather than technical. Gestalt therapy is an existential and phenomenological approach and as such is experiential and experimental (Perls, L. 1992, P4).” Two existential philosophers, Nietzsche, and Buber especially influenced the person considered to be the primary author of Gestalt Therapy, Fritz Perls. Indeed Buber’s work “I And Thou” finds its way into one of the defining principals of Gestalt Therapy (Clarkson, 1989). I would argue that the Phenomenology referred to above by Laura Perls in Gestalt Therapy is often closer to the ontology of Heidegger and Sartre, a description of being, than simple phenomenological objectivity (Cannon, 1991). Either approach would consider the question ”why” to be irrelevant.
There is controversy as to how much influence Nietzsche had on Freud and Psychoanalysis. Freud denied reading Nietzsche, however the parallels are too numerous to ignore, AH Chapman and M Chapman-Santana, (1995) list five: the concept of the unconscious, the repression of unacceptable ideas and emotions, the idea of reaction formation, the idea of dreams as symbols and cathartic process, and the concept of projection of hostile feelings as the source of paranoia.

Rogers is a prominent figure in Humanistic Psychology, which is rooted in Phenomenology and Existentialism. His non-directive approach rises out of phenomenology and the recognition and respect for individual choice. His description of what takes place in a therapeutic relationship is clearly rooted in existential philosophy; “The client moves from being a person compelled by internal and external forces beyond his control, toward being a person who makes responsible choices(Rogers 1967,p48).” His focus on recognizing one’s freedom as an integral part of the psychotherapeutic process, and how he defines freedom shows that Rogerian non-directive therapy is existential psychotherapy... “It is the burden of being responsible for the person one chooses to be. It is the recognition by the person that he is an emerging process, not a static end product (Rogers, 1967 p52)”

Thus we see that at least four of the six influences on AEP are in some way connected to Existential Philosophy. I am arguing that of the six, Existential
Philosophy (especially Sartre), and Gestalt Therapy provide the greatest influence on AEP. I see the relational aspect of Gestalt therapy, which is rooted in the philosophy of Martin Buber, especially his book “I and Thou”, as a prominent force in AEP, and I see the focus of the body, rooted in Gestalt and Bioenergetics, as a close second influence from Gestalt.

According to Buber there are two attitudes that describe Man's relation to the world, I-Thou and I-IT. I-Thou comes from wholeness and a present-centered relationship with reality. I-IT comes from a place of fragmentation and objectification. The I only exists in relation to Thou or It. (Buber, 1958). I-Thou is not a fixed state. One moves between contact and withdrawal. This movement between I-Thou and I-It is a source of tension and melancholy for man. (Buber, 1958).

Buber is not talking about relationship in the usual sense here, he is describing a rhythmic formation and dissolution of the ego in relation to the other. "In the beginning is relation" (Buber, 1958, p18). He is stating that the I does not exist until the relationship is formed.

"The first primary word can be resolved, certainly, into I and Thou, but it did not arise from their being set together; by its nature it precedes I. The second word arose arose from the setting together of I and It: by nature It comes after I." (Buber, 1958, p22)
So the I is formed in relation to the Thou and then objectifies the other and the self into It. The result is separation and an anxious longing for connection.

In Gestalt the I-Thou/I-It conceptualization shows up in the language of contact. Contact is not a state, it is an activity. The renaming of "defenses" into "contact boundary disturbances" is not only pointing to a different way entering into therapy, it is a different vision of what constitutes healing. Healing takes place at the boundary. Life takes place at the boundary. It is where we touch, I-Thou, and experience separateness, I-It, (Perls, L.1992).

A significant difference from Gestalt Therapy in the process of AEP, to the best of my understanding, is in the influence of Sartre on AEP. In the methodology of AEP "Encouraging the Development of 'Pure' or Purifying Reflection' verses 'Impure Reflection' ", the clarity of Sartre's philosophy enters into the process. I think there is a relation between "the sterile/fertile void" of Gestalt Therapy and "purifying reflection" of AEP. The sterile void is a place of frustration one enters into when it becomes clear that what one was doing is no longer working and no alternative is apparent. It is a place of enormous build up of energy. As described in the AEP handout (Cannon), purifying reflection is when one becomes aware of the process of impure reflection. Impure reflection is the attempt to make oneself into an object, solid and fixed. The reason for impure reflection is to avoid the buildup of anxiety. This is related to "Bad Faith", which is refusing to accept oneself as constantly unfolding, becoming, "as a combination of being and nothingness, and
in evading the responsibility of free decisions, whether in the past or the future" (Barnes, 1959, p64). Bad faith is an attempt to avoid responsibility for freedom of choice by placing blame for one's actions or inactions on some outside other. In Sartre's view, man is nothing but what he makes of himself. "If existence really does precede essence, there is no explaining things away to a fixed and given nature…We are all alone with no excuses" (Sartre, 1965 p47).

The demo session with Tom provides some working examples of several AEP methodologies and attitudes. He began the session with stories about what happens in his business presentations and some thoughts about how this may be related to his relationship with his deceased father. What is immediately apparent to me is that while Tom is "talking about", his body is experiencing. I then invite him to go with the experience and this brings up anxiety, which he calls resisting. He says “I notice some resistance when you said that” He even begins to constrict his voice at this point. This anxiety rises up from the destabilization of impure reflection, "I am a person who behaves in this way and holds shame in this way", where he begins to recognize and let go of this fixed view of himself. Tom, having experience in the process of AEP, reluctantly agrees to challenge himself. He notices a ‘constriction here”, pointing to his chest. His language is passive, “a constriction here”, I let this pass because I have not yet gotten a clear agreement to this experiment.
After the initial experiment of Tom exaggerating the movement of his arms, I then invite him to return to his initial story if he wishes. This is simply to bring a clarity, in the moment, of who is choosing to move forward with this work. I invite him to “speak from the place in here”, his chest, where he feels the constriction. Tom is skillful in his formulations of who he is, what he does, what he knows about the way he does things, and why. I, sometimes gently, sometimes clumsily, stay with his story and nudge in the direction of experiencing present phenomena. I ask, “when you go to that spot what wants to happen?” The energy begins to shift. He responds, “I just want to be alone”. He interprets this experience as a way of blocking fear, which may or may not be correct. At this time I do not know. I then bring awareness to the original topic to see if there is still charge around this subject, money issues and giving presentations. Tom goes into another story about giving workshops, which boils down to “not being seen and not being validated. I am asking myself, “is this the charge?” We begin to explore what is here. He names the charge “resentment”. I bring in more responsible, active language to try on; “so I resent...” He constricts his voice again. His answer is. love is conditional, I have to conform for love.

I still have no idea where this is going. Tom is very clear about setting boundaries on his in-laws and resenting, what he perceives, as conditions. I bring it back to the presentation audience to see what may be the same or different in relation to his experience with in-laws. Tom then begins to formulate a connection
between his father and the presentation audience. I am aware of a likely father transference onto the audience and invite Tom to work with the audience. He chooses a more direct path and puts his father in the empty chair.

As Tom begins the experiment with his father it is clear that he is in his experience and connecting with his internalized father. He is still defending himself from his experience by explaining it, however he knows it’s not working. My interventions are directed toward inviting Tom to move closer to contacting his experience, which in this moment is the energy built up around his relationship with his father. I am aware as he is working with his father, with all the complications, this is a positive father projection sitting in the chair. It is my hunch that the corrective experience will rise from the words of the introjected father. I invite him to “to tell Tom what he wants for him”. During this experiment Tom moves into an intimate connection with his father and experiences "warmth and love" throughout his entire body. He does this primarily by letting go of the fixed identity of "I am a person that blames his father, etc." Tom states “I get it like I’ve never gotten it before”. He then adopts a more open body posture, he even opens his voice. He says “by letting go of the blame, I can connect with the loving part of you”.

After this experiment Tom then returns to his opening story about his presentations around money. It is clear that he still feels he is "not a part of that world" (the world of business). He has not yet fully integrated the experience of
contact with the energy of his father to the point he is able to generalize this experience into being open to contact with his presentation audience. There is still some unfinished business in this working. There is a disconnect between Tom's body language, pushing away, and his words, I want to find a way to connect. What I do is stay with Tom, reflect what I am seeing with his body, and direct his awareness back to his body. He eventually finds a way to hold his body that connects to the relationship he wants with the world. There is no interpretation involved here, we simply experiment with what the body is wanting to do. To use Tom’s words what the body wants is to be “more open and natural”.

References


