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Authenticity and the Play of Unconditional Presence in Psychotherapy:
From resolute searching to natural release

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Introduction

This paper considers the theory and practice of authenticity in psychotherapy from Existential and Buddhist perspectives. Our discussion follows Heidegger's development of the concept of authenticity from his initial understanding of it as "resolute anticipation" (1962/1927), which opens the way to the therapeutic activity of resolute inquiry, to his later understanding of authenticity as engagement in the (potentially therapeutic) non-activity, "cosmic play" (*Ereignis*) of "natural release" (*gelassenheit*) (1977/1944; 1966/1959; Zimmerman, 1981). This development acknowledges that authenticity, as an ontological potentiality, is actualized along a continuum of personal (ontic) realization, and as such suggests a therapeutic continuum for uncovering and strengthening authentic presence. Depending on a person's capacity to be present in the here and now, a therapeutic continuum extends from practicing a deliberate and courageous search for truth to that of resting in the natural (released and releasing) play of one's true nature.

This Daseinsanalytic and Buddhist-informed understanding of authenticity is based on a decidedly different *approach* from that of conventional psychology. Psychology in general approaches human experience through a dualistic, strictly ontic vision, conceiving of its subject matter as an encapsulated entity. For instance, conventional psychology envisions an individual, person, ego, self, or subjectivity that is separate and distinct from a world, others, and external objects. As we know, this approach is an application of the Cartesian view that separates the external world (*res extensa*) from an interior experiencer of that world (*res cogitans*). In contrast, an approach informed by Heidegger and the Buddha's inquiry into the nature of the human being begins with a non-dualistic understanding of human nature. Reconceived as *dasein*, the subject matter of psychology is no longer construed as an encapsulated entity, but is seen to be the field of human experiencing. This view recognizes that subjective experience is inter-relational, always occurring in a world, with others, and in regard to objects that appear external to an internal perceiver.

A key word in the above sentence is "appear". Perceptions of the five senses as well as imagination, emotions, and concepts *appear* to a cognizant consciousness, which has the capacity to *see* perceptions as being separate and distinct from the perceiving of them, or not. It is also possible to *see* that perceptions are actually appearing *within* one's own consciousness. Where else could they appear? With this view and within this experiential awareness - of undivided consciousness - it becomes possible to relate more *truly* and intimately with experiences. As both Heidegger and the Buddha observed, *being human is fundamentally a capacity of openness*, like a *clearing* in the forest, in which all manner of experiences arise, persist, and pass away. "I" am not the

sensory, emotional, and cognitive perceptions that come and go, but the field of awareness which allows for their coming and going. *The true nature of human being is the cognizant capacity of empty-openness, in which an experiencing subject and experienced objects arise together in an field of potential clarity.*

Meditative exercise

As we sit together just now in this room [or as you read these words in front of a computer], please notice what you are aware of. You may notice the temperature of the room,...the sound of rain outside,...whether you are comfortable sitting in your chair,... these and other objects of the five senses come into your awareness.

You may also notice objects of mind, such as thoughts, feelings, and judgments, which in Buddhism is understood simply as the functioning of the sixth sense (mind, *citta*). For instance, you may like and be intrigued by what I am saying, or you may dislike or be bored with these words.... You may notice that this discussion stimulates your thoughts on a particular concept,... or that you are daydreaming...

Simply notice these that these various sensations, feelings, and thoughts arise, persist for awhile, and pass away. Notice that you can let them come and go or, you can focus on a particular sensory appearance, grasp onto it and find yourself completely absorbed inside of it...developing it, charging it with emotional preoccupation...

Now, notice *where* these various experiences are occurring....Do you notice that each sensation, feeling, and thought appears within the general field of your

awareness? Can you sense that even as the content of your moment-to-moment experience changes, there is a field-potentiality, a *clearing*, a *capacity for knowing* that doesn't change, cannot be located, and is the very nature of your awareness of self and other? Can you see that you are not the various experiences that come and go, but the capacity of openness which allows for the coming and going of experience? This open presence, or *dasein*, is the fundamental nature of human being which ordinarily remains unrecognized.

It is a mark of human existence that we tend to lose touch with this astonishing truth of our actual nature. Psychotherapy (as well as meditation) becomes necessary because authentic presence has been lost, and its place, fear, confusion, and aggression arise and cause considerable suffering. The essential goal of psychotherapy is to rediscover the uncanny, astonishing truth of our actual condition. ***To be authentic is to accord to one's true nature.*** It is to access and strengthen the capacity for bearing the lightness and darkness of being without fleeing from one's own experience. This challenge is nothing less than to practice being a *whole person* rather than a divided self, lost in *das man* and a world of objects, distractions, compulsive entertainment, busyness, and proliferating mental constructs.

Lostness and inauthenticity

Finding ourselves lost and anxious (within a dualistic vision), we feel incomplete, ungrounded, and sense that something essential is missing in our lives, even

if we cannot say exactly what that something might be. We long to fill this inner sense of lack by *self-grounding*, by striving for security, pleasure, and self-gratification, and by striving against insecurity, pain, and humiliation of all kinds. Between grasping after what we hope will fulfill us and fleeing from what we fear or dislike, we spend our lives ahead of ourselves, either thinking about a future or reviewing the past, distracted from the present moment and out of touch with our actual condition. This “everyday” kind of “lostness” is normal, and to the extent that we face it, it makes us aware of our vulnerability, longing, neediness, and rage against time and the conditions of our lives over which we have little or no control. As painful as this awareness is, it may be a wake-up call that motivates us to find a less painful, more sane way of living.

However, when we do not, cannot, or dare not acknowledge our confusion and vulnerability, we are in danger of more sharply hiding from ourselves. The vocabulary of psychoanalysis, including such terms as, “repression”, “dissociation”, or “displacement” for instance, articulates various psychodynamics of self-hiddenness, or inauthenticity. While feeling lost and incomplete may be a normal part of the human experience, *inauthenticity-proper does not arise until we conceal our lostness, including our longing, aversion, and indifference, from ourselves*. In self-concealment, we more thoroughly lose touch with our open nature and resist individuation, getting ever more lost and confused in the apparently secure worlds of *das man*. Instead of recognizing ourselves accurately as a realm of openness, we identify with self-limiting mental-emotional constructs that are merely passing through the field of our consciousness (-unconsciousness). In regard to this lostness, Heidegger lamented, “Everyone is an other and nobody is himself.” The first, and most basic therapeutic challenge is to find and

accept oneself and one's experience as it actually is rather than as we construe and misconstrue it.

The search for authenticity

To face one's actual experience, it is necessary to open oneself to the flux of experience. Heidegger noted (1962/1927) that it requires *resoluteness* to face one's mortality and freedom without cloaking oneself in the reassuring constructs of consensual reality (*das man*: including the conditions of one's family of origin, ethnicity, culture, etc.). That is, it is necessary to *fight for one's life*, to courageously struggle to find oneself and reckon with one's experience as it is. In this fight, as in a struggle of any kind, one may or may not prevail. Therefore, a distinction is made between an "inauthentic self" and an "authentic self", between a "false self" and a "true self", and a practice of "self-actualization" rather than "self deception". In this necessary and difficult struggle, authenticity is understood to be a truth or quality belonging to oneself. A courageous and resolute search process aims to discover an "inner something": a feeling or insight, that is truly "mine", not belonging to someone else, or in conformity to the opinions and dictates of others. The discovery of authenticity in this sense is understood as personal truth. It involves self-honesty and the accepting of self-responsibility based on exerting *effort* and *the will to choose*, such as, "I stand here and not there", "I value this and not that". Affirmation and renunciation are essential on a path of individuation through which one dares to be oneself rather than pretending to be someone else.

However, if we look more deeply into the phenomenology of resolute searching, we see that *self-discovery is a process of becoming*. We find ourselves as we open to our experience and respond from that openness. No final state of authenticity, absolute ground, or unchanging true self can be located. Instead, we find that the flux of our experience is like “a spring overflowing its springbox” (Rumi, 1995, p.178). Instead of a particular authentic self, we find a cognizant presence, a no-thingness which allows for the arising of many things. Resolute inquiry remains a search for and approach to authenticity rather than an attainment of any particular (authentic) state of being. Still, there remains “work” to be done. The habituation toward lostness and inauthenticity remains. We still have to “work through” the ways in which we practice self-grounding and distraction from our true nature. Losing ourselves over and over again, there remains something to search for, to accomplish, and a continuing struggle. Resolute inquiry must be repeatedly practiced. Yet, if the search process *is* repeated, one gradually strengthens one’s capacity to “bear the lightness of being”: the unfindability of an authentic something or someone. With this development, we may then come to appreciate that a more subtle, deeper, and mature authenticity is a way of being that allows for a letting go of seeking. Understanding that there is nothing particular to find, the way opens to relax into the spaciousness of non-finding. The serious seeking for a particular truth may release into its opened and lightened – in the sense of unburdened – essential nature.

Mature authenticity as natural release (*gelassenheit*)

In Heidegger's later work, he refers to authenticity as a *letting be* in which there is a *release of striving* to ground and secure oneself, as the will to find an authentic self relaxes. This does not mean that there are two different kinds of authenticity. Rather, it reflects a *deepening* and a more *sustained* embodiment of unconditional presence. Becoming more familiar with being open in the world, one naturally finds a deeper acceptance of the insecurities of mortality, sexuality, impermanence, and non-finding. In allowing oneself to be more thoroughly saturated with the uncertainties, mysteries, and insecurities of life, one becomes more able to bear the unboundedness of one's true nature. With a strengthening of the capacity for openness, it becomes clear that there is nowhere to get to, nothing to change, and nothing further – beyond the here and now - to search for. *Authentic presence reveals itself to be an opening that is not self-referential, but a yielding to unconditional liveliness, the ever-renewing source of a meaningful existence.*

Summary

When engaged as an experiential therapeutic practice of opening oneself to the world, to others, and to the otherness within oneself, authenticity as resolute searching gradually matures into a play of natural release. Where one sought to find one's true self, one finds no self. And, with a strengthened capability of accepting (*ek-static*) non-finding, in the place of a secure and grounded self one finds instead a willingness to wait, increased courage to face the unknown, and renewed faith that light breaks in its own time.

Maturing authenticity allows for effortless therapeutic conversations that are both non-intentional and undistracted. The “work” of psychotherapy transforms into a “play” of unconditional exchanges. *Being present in relationship manifests as openness and responsiveness to the otherness of the other as well as oneself.* Psychotherapy no longer emphasizes the discovery of specific truths about a self, but emphasizes opening to and resting in the more saturated, unconditioned presence that is the source of personal truths. Insights, discoveries, and clarification of life projects are not emphasized beyond the point where they need to be in order to accord to a particular person’s capacity to recognize and accept them. In this way, insights are not reified as absolute discoveries, independent of and disconnected from the ontological openness in which they arise. Rather, whatever emotions, insights, or confusions arise are seen as the appearances they are, like wisps of fog or an antlered deer crossing a clearing. And while appearances, be they ugly or beautiful, desirable or despised, change, the field-like awareness that is the very possibility of their coming and going, does not. This is the profound reality glimpsed by Martin Heidegger and fully realized by the Buddha. While Heidegger found that it was possible to only have rare and fleeting glimpses (*augenblick*) of authentic presence, Buddhas and more realized beings have found it is possible to further develop one’s contemplative capacity to have more frequent glimpses, to allow them to sink-in deeper, and to sustain them for longer duration. These luminaries open a way and offer a challenge to psychotherapists and Daseinsanalysts to practice in a way that is in accord with this truth.

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