

Death anxiety and climate chaos: What good is therapy when it's already too late?

by Matthew Henson



Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism... Thus, existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him. And when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.

(Sartre, 1947)

Just what is it about us, about species Homo sapiens – what is it about our form of consciousness – that can look self-extinction in the eye and continue on as if the Emperor were clothed?

(Bernstein, 2012: 195)

Introduction

There is growing awareness within the ecology movement of the reality of climate change: it is already too late; climate catastrophe cannot now be avoided (Totton, 2015). Whilst the theory and practice of ecopsychology is emerging in response to this awareness, mainstream psychology and psychotherapy has yet to fully grasp the reality and address it head on.

De Botton (2017) recently tweeted: “*Psychotherapy is the single greatest innovation of our times and the discipline on which the eventual flourishing of humankind rests*”. If this is true at all, psychotherapy will not fulfil this potential if it continues to fail to respond to the Age of Anthropocene (see, for e.g., Carrington, 2016) in which we now live. But what should that response be? What does humanistic integrative psychotherapy have to offer? What, as therapists, do we do now in practice? Do we just carry on as if the Emperor were clothed? What might the alternatives be? What good is therapy when it's already too late?

This paper offers one answer to those questions. I will draw upon existentialism, which is a humanism (Sartre, 1945), to make the case that anthropocentrism can properly be understood as an inauthentic expression of death anxiety. From there I will argue that existential-phenomenology offers psychotherapy a non-directive framework to help us take responsibility for how we respond to our existence; both our individual human lives and as representatives of

humanity in this Anthropocene Epoch. I assert that the principles of working therapeutically with individual existential crisis can be transposed onto the collective ecological crisis we are facing.

In challenging anthropocentrism, I will, hopefully not too ironically, focus on psychotherapy as practised between humans. This is in no way intended to be dismissive of the other-than-human and more-than-human life with whom we share this beautiful planet. Rather I hope that by advancing an existential challenge to anthropocentrism in this context, the benefits of human psychotherapy might extend beyond individual human clients, to the other-than-human and more-than-human.

For academic purposes, quotations using the masculine pronoun will be faithfully reproduced in this article, but with an expressed acknowledgement that such gender-biased binary language does not represent my own values.

Context

This is not the first paper to draw comparisons between existentialism and ecopsychology. Adams (2005) has already, in my view successfully, made the case that the concerns of ecopsychology are at once the concerns of existentialism. This sentiment is also captured by Cohn (1995) who notes that “*at the centre of an existential approach [to psychotherapy] is the notion of human existence as a “Being-in-the-World” (as against Descartes’ separation of human existence from the world)”* (22). Phenomenology also features heavily in some existing models of ecopsychology (see, for e.g., Fisher, 2012; Totton, 2011).

What is perhaps more novel in this paper, is the explicit linking of climate denial to the existential notion of death anxiety, in pursuit of a pragmatic approach to psychotherapy that both responds to the challenge of climate chaos and meets the humanistic requirement of being a non-directive intervention. I assert that we can still live well, making appropriate decisions in the face of extinction, without defining ‘well’ or ‘appropriate’ in terms of prescribing any specific life choices.

Climate chaos

To be clear, it is not posited that the world will literally end:

but our current human world, the world we grew up in, will cease to be viable: millions or billions of us and trillions more other-than-humans will die, the mass extinction of species that is already underway will accelerate, and a large proportion of the planet will become uninhabitable by humans

(Rust & Totton, 2012: xviii)

This prediction isn’t fanciful. It isn’t fake news. It is supported by hard science (see for e.g., Pachauri et al., 2014; Solomona et al., 2008).

Maiteny (2012) notes that approximately every 15 years since the 1960s, “*a wave of ecological anxiety has washed over “western” society*” (47), triggering a sequential reaction of optimism followed by economic recession taking priority and a discrediting of environmental science. In each wave’s deeper and darker wake, comes growing despondency about whether humans can ever change, “*to the point where it is seen by some as a sign that Homo sapiens is an ecological aberration, an evolutionary dead-end*” (ibid). This apparent inability to change has little to do

with paucity of resources. For at least a decade, the UN has had both the money and the know-how to stop global warming (Adam, 2007). So, what is it that underpins this human aberration?

Anthropocentrism (Seed et al., 1988), a human mindset that constantly reinforces our separation from, and superiority over, other-than-human life, is a central factor. Anthropocentrism functions “*in a way which is remarkably parallel to other human-to-human oppressions and exploitations*” (Prentice, 2012: 177). A number of psychological notions, ranging in degree of complexity, have been linked more or less directly to this anthropocentric human arrogance. These include simple greed, overwhelm at the sheer magnitude of the issue (Totton, 2012), alienation from our animal nature (Bernstein, 2005), ambivalent attachment between humans and the rest of nature (Rust, 2012) and narcissism (Robertson, 2012). These concepts offer valid lenses through which to view the problem but, as Robertson (2012) notes, they all point to what is *wrong* with humankind and a different, less judgemental, context might be required. Existentialism offers that less judgemental context when we consider anthropocentrism, and all the sub-attitudes that contribute to the mindset, as an inauthentic expression of death anxiety.

Death anxiety

I had seen them both naked, the greatest man and the smallest man: all too similar to one another, even the greatest all too human!

(Nietzsche, 1961: 236)

The term *death anxiety* is something of a misnomer and is used at times quite spuriously to mean different things. Perhaps not surprisingly, given that it consists of the words ‘death’ and ‘anxiety’, the term could be thought of as a fear of death, or, ‘death dread / terror’ (Yalom, 2008). Whilst the fear of death as an event is indeed quite common, the notion of death anxiety in existential terms points to something much more broad and subtle.

Drawing on Heidegger, Rennie (2006) notes that “*death represents the possibility of the impossibility of existence*” (333). Death signifies the temporality of human (Dasein) existence and this temporality provides the relational context – the horizon – for our ontological anxiety. For Heidegger (2003) Being-in-the-world is always Being-towards-death; “*death signifies a peculiar possibility-of-Being in which the very Being of one’s own Dasein is an issue*” (284).

Put very simply, our individual human existence, the greatest and smallest alike, is temporary and because it is temporary it matters to us, we care about it, which is the basis of existential anxiety. In this sense, death anxiety does not necessarily point only to the event of our death (although it might include death as an event), but the inescapable temporality of existence. A more accurate, if perhaps less catchy, term would be *temporality anxiety* or, to draw on Spinelli (1997), *temporal life anxiety*. Everything that we do within the context of our whole existence can be viewed as either an *authentic* or *inauthentic* response to this fundamental anxiety.

Authenticity

[to] have one’s daily life in the decisive dialectic of the infinite, and yet to continue to live: this is both the art of life and its difficulty

(Kierkegaard, 1968: 79-80)

Like death anxiety, *authenticity* can be understood in different ways. In its more usual definition, authenticity is associated with genuineness and can be taken to mean living truthfully in accordance with one's deep convictions, beliefs and values (Jacobsen, 2007). However, if we pay close attention to existential philosophy, authenticity takes on a significantly different meaning; one that has nothing to do with genuineness (Craig, 2009). As Spinelli notes, the notion of authenticity as congruence permits a self-contained certainty for those who follow an authentic calling. Existential-phenomenological principles, however, offer no such certainty:

At best...authenticity rests upon the degree to which there is a willingness to embrace that which exists for us, in the way it exists for us, in all its anxious, uncertain relatedness.
(Spinelli, 2017, 295)

Here, *authenticity* is taken specifically to mean a state in which we face, head on, the anxious, uncertain relatedness of our temporality in the moment-to-moment of our temporal existence. Conversely, *inauthenticity* refers to our everyday defences against the distress linked to this awareness:

The idea of facing death head on... is too difficult for many of us, particularly when it is our own death that we confront; we defend against our anxiety through various forms of denial, sometimes half-realizing what we do and overtly asserting that this is the only way to have a comfortable life

(Kasket, 2006: 137)

Reference to 'for many of us' might suggest that 'for a few' a life lived wholly facing death head on is possible. That would be misleading. The challenge of existentialism, as so beautifully captured by Kierkegaard above, is for us to live authentically; to live each moment in full awareness of our temporality. However, whilst this authentic awareness might be the art of life, inauthenticity is necessarily our default state. Everyday life involves attempts, often outside of our awareness, to combat the inevitable anxiety that accompanies our temporality. Some of these, depending upon societal values, will be regarded as 'functional', such as pursuing careers, buying houses, joining societies/clubs, and so on. Others will be considered 'dysfunctional' responses, such as behaviours labelled addictions, self-injury, suicide. All, in existential terms, are inauthentic if the choice, whatever it is, is made other than in full awareness of temporality.

Mandić (2008) reminds us that one [inauthentic] defence against death anxiety is "*the fundamental belief in one's own 'specialness'*" (255). This sense of specialness facilitates us to engage in any number of behaviours which are harmful to us, such as poisoning our bodies through ingesting cigarette smoke, drinking excessive alcohol or maintaining an unhealthy diet. I propose that anthropocentrism is the collective, species-wide, expression of this 'specialness' as an inauthentic response to death anxiety. We carry on poisoning the Earth through high carbon emission behaviours in much the same way that we poison our individual bodies; not because we are evil and/or stupid, but with an arrogance that belies our existential insecurity. We carry on taking long-haul flights, accepting unnecessary plastic packaging, blindly supporting cruel mass-scale farming practices, as if the Emperor were clothed; not because we don't care, but because it is easier than facing our ontological anxiety head on. It is our default state.

So where do we go from here?

Existential-Phenomenology

A friend recently asked me to briefly summarise existentialism for his teenage daughter. I immediately winked and made reference to French folk sitting in trendy Parisian cafés, wearing dark clothes, with darker coffee to accompany their even darker moods. I am quite fond of that stereotype. I am less fond of the other ways in which existentialism is sometimes dismissed. Anyone with an interest in existentialism knows that it is not an obsession or morbid fascination with death. Rather, it is an appreciation that when we hold our mortality in full awareness, a different frame appears around our life choices.

It is not the aim of existential-phenomenological psychotherapy to alleviate death anxiety in the sense of a contractual task established between client and therapist, at least not as I practise it. Whilst I have occasionally, when it has felt appropriate, asked the rather stereotypically psychoanalytic sounding question: ‘Tell me about your mother’, I don’t remember ever asking of a client: ‘Tell me about your death anxiety’. Similarly, authenticity is not an objective of therapy, but is rather something that can be caught and nurtured within the therapeutic process. The way in which some existential therapists seek to create a frame for that, is through the practice of phenomenology.

When Merleau-Ponty (2004) states that “*we shall find in ourselves, and nowhere else, the unity and true meaning of phenomenology*” (vii), he alludes to the difficulty of defining a philosophical attitude which is necessarily essentially obscure. Without doing phenomenology, “*it is practically impossible to understand phenomenology*” (Ihde, 1986: 14). With that caveat, Heidegger (2003) does offer a working definition:

“phenomenology” means...to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself...But here we are expressing nothing else than the maxim... ‘To the things themselves!’ (58)

The imperative within phenomenology is to discard psychological theory in preference for actual lived experience. Within a one-to-one human context, existential psychotherapy can be described as a relational, Dasein to Dasein (client and therapist) co-created phenomenological exploration of the client’s lived experience; their Being-in-the-world, which, as noted above, is always Being-towards-death. Again, this does not suppose that therapy sessions are 50 or 60 minutes of authenticity, rather for much of the time the therapy will usefully and necessarily focus on inauthentic concerns. A phenomenological therapeutic attitude does not require authenticity from clients or therapists, but it does facilitate the emergence of what Heidegger terms *moments of vision*: “*That Present which is held in authentic temporality and which thus is authentic itself*” (ibid: 387); when our life choices become framed in the full awareness of our temporality. In those moments, our individual inauthentic specialness falls away and with it comes the ability to make authentic, if not necessarily easy, life choices.

At the risk of labouring the point, this is not a directive process, but rather an acknowledgement that all human concerns are at once existential concerns in the context of Being-towards-death. If, as a therapist (and fellow Dasein whose concerns are also those of Being-towards-death), I listen to my clients with an ear so attuned, then I facilitate the conditions in which moments of vision might emerge.

Lest *moments of vision* sound romantic and appealing, let us be reminded of how difficult they are to endure, hence the psychological defences. They can, and do, result in crisis.

Existential crisis

Existential crisis, a crisis in our very existence, occurs when our inauthentic structures are stripped away and the things we were certain of no longer hold true; when the things we valued, such as our careers, possessions, hobbies, politics, personal relationships, and so on, suddenly feel meaningless and/or insignificant. This can occur, but not necessarily, in relation to a life event, often associated with loss of one kind or another. People sometimes present for therapy in existential crisis following such an event. At other times, the crisis occurs during, or even in direct relation to, therapy.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, the role of existential therapy in these moments is not to alleviate the crisis, but rather to withstand and fully explore it. This can be a tricky process and it is of course crucial that great care is taken so that the client, and/or therapist, is not overwhelmed to the extent that risk of harm is heightened. The ultimate outcome of existential crisis might well be that a new inauthentic life structure is substituted for the failing old one. But that should not be the aim of therapy and, in the meantime, there is an opportunity. The existential crisis *is itself* the authentic response to death anxiety and should be recognised and valued as such. The moments when we are brought unavoidably before death, are often the moments when we feel most alive. They are also the moments when we make the *best*, most responsible choices.

The future of therapy?

I propose that this existential-phenomenological approach is directly applicable and appropriate as a challenge to anthropocentrism. When the temporality of the other-than-human world is held in awareness, alongside awareness of our individual temporality, not only our individual inauthentic specialness, but also our anthropocentrism falls away in the moment of vision. Again, for the avoidance of all doubt, this does not require clients to make any specific choices. Neither does it dictate any specific values. That said, it is much more difficult for me to be abusive to myself, other humans and other-than-humans if my decisions are made from a place of authentic awareness.

Part of facing the reality of climate chaos involves acknowledging that:

In all probability...something will survive; and the small fraction of humanity which is likely to be part of the "something" will need all the help it can get in staying sane, and in carrying forward the seeds of a sane culture, founded in ecological consciousness.

(Rust & Totton, 2012: xviii)

This statement isn't intended to be taken as an indication that nothing can be done other than mop-up in the wake of climate catastrophe. The imperative within the ecopsychology movement is to act now. As a psychotherapist, I can never prevent death. I cannot keep my clients alive forever or take away the inevitable despair that that realisation brings. The best that I can offer my clients is to withstand, as far as I possibly can, the reality of our temporality and in doing so facilitate the conditions for authentic engagement with whatever concerns my clients might bring to therapy. If I hold that Being-in-the-world is at once Being-towards-death, then I respond to my clients' concerns in a way that is both non-directive and facilitates the best possible life choices. If I hold Being-towards-death within the context of the Anthropocene Age, then I respond to my clients' concerns in a way that is both non-directive and facilitates authentic, responsible choices in the face of climate catastrophe; choices which impact not only on individual humans, but also other humans and other-than-humans.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to address the reality of climate chaos from the perspective of humanistic integrative psychotherapy. In particular, I ask what good is therapy when it's already too late? In answering that question, I have drawn upon the "first move" of existentialism to make every Human/Homo sapiens/Dasein aware of what s/he is; a Being-towards-death. I have argued that, whilst our day-to-day existence is necessarily *inauthentic*, *authentic* existential awareness, Heidegger's *moments of vision*, can be nurtured through adopting an existential-phenomenological attitude within a humanistic integrative therapeutic frame. With that authentic awareness comes the capacity to take full responsibility for our human existence.

Existential-phenomenology has never offered a cure for death. Instead it challenges our sense of specialness and further challenges us to live with the inevitability of our death in full awareness; whilst at the same time acknowledging how difficult this is. It also offers a pragmatic approach to psychotherapy, which facilitates us to meet this challenge.

The challenge of existentialism has never been more important than it is today, as we look climate catastrophe unavoidably in the face. Existential-phenomenology offers no cure for climate chaos, but it does offer a non-directive methodology, which can facilitate us to make informed choices about how to live well in the meantime. This not only includes choices that we make for ourselves and which impact upon our individual lives, but also choices that we make as representatives of humanity, which impact upon all life on Earth.

Dedication

In memory of my daughter, Eva Marie, and my father, Peter; my real existential teachers, who gifted me *moments of vision*.

Also in memory of the countless other-than-humans and humans who died on the same days, and who are no less important.



Matthew Henson is an existential psychotherapist, ecopsychologist and trainer in private practice.
www.matthewhenson.ie – info@matthewhenson.ie

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