

Transcendence and the Psychotherapeutic Quest for Happiness

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Introduction

The perennial questions that continue to tax and confuse people are whether life has any meaning and how to live so as to make the most of the time allotted to us. The contemporary pursuit of hedonism and happiness can be irksome to those who live in difficult circumstances and needs to be reconsidered and set in perspective.

This paper will address some of the existential challenges that are intrinsic to the human condition and that people inevitably have to learn to live with in order to find their way in the world. It will argue that our philosophical outlook and the values we live by are a more essential part of daily existence than we might think. What makes a real difference in the outcome of psychotherapy is the depth of engagement between therapist and client and this is in large part related to deep communication about the things that actually matter.

Existential therapy aims to face the dangers, paradoxes and contradictions of life head on so that people may find a way to transcend them rather than hoping for utopia and happiness ever after. If we have clarity about what is happening at all dimensions of our life we stand a better chance to find new direction, purpose and energy. By using a combination of psychological research, philosophical methods and dialogical interaction, people can be enabled to find the courage to tackle the very things they have tried to obfuscate and hide from previously. This can lead to a stronger sense of moral, emotional and spiritual awareness and with it a renewed motivation to live a meaningful life.

Defining Transcendence

There are many possible definitions of the concept of transcendence.

In a monotheistic view of the world, transcendence is usually defined as the Divine, which is placed above the Immanent - seen as the physical manifestation of this higher order. But this is only one way of looking at things. There are many other ways to define transcendence. Literally the term transcendence means 'that which goes beyond or that which surpasses something', which explains why it is so easily confounded with the supernatural. This is not true in many people's value systems, as the natural itself may be perceived as the transcending principle, i.e. as that which transcends human experience. This is a widespread view amongst scientists and particularly the medical profession: that the facts of nature surpass human experience and that intervention in medical, physical and factual terms is the primary principle of transcendence of dysfunction or difficulty. Unfortunately this is not always the most appropriate form of intervention.

This is why it is important to start by being aware of the underlying values and beliefs that psychotherapists, psychologists and psychiatrists bring to the table before they even start listening to their clients' and patients' beliefs and values. The objectives of our own interventions are set by our own intentions and their underlying worldviews.

Stated or implied objectives can vary enormously. They include to:

- Cure or heal a person in a physical manner
- Help people to cope with current challenges and providing social support
- Educate, applying cognitive correction
- Enable people to have greater understanding
- Achieve a full analysis of character, leading to insight
- Establish the principle of a person's autonomy and free functioning
- Go beyond current level of operating and to aim for creative living
- Encourage a person to attain faith by means of a sustaining spiritual principle
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None of these values, ideals, beliefs and therapeutic principles are necessarily right or wrong in themselves; it depends on how they are pursued and wielded. However, it is crucial that we scientist practitioners have awareness of the principles to which we adhere. As therapists, psychiatrists or psychologists we have to reflect on the bias that we hold and carry forward into each session. If we did not hold our own beliefs we would not have the incisiveness to observe, intervene and inspire other people, let alone the motivation to do our jobs in often difficult circumstances. We can only really work convincingly with people who are lost and confused about the values they live by if we have a clear sense of where we stand ourselves. We have to be prepared to ask philosophical questions of ourselves.

As Camus said: 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is... whether life is or is not worth living. (Camus, 1975)

The question is how we respond to this problem and whether we allow for other people to respond to it differently without trying imposing our own point of view. As scientist practitioners it is crucial that we should be able to do so and to come to our clients' and patients' problems in a clear headed and even-handed manner.

Let us look at the various worldviews therapists and their clients may hold. The below diagram gives an overview of the many different ideological views and the values of transcendence they create for people. It is crucial for psychotherapists to be able to set aside their own views on these matters and to be available to understand what their clients or patients believe, as their beliefs will guide any progress.

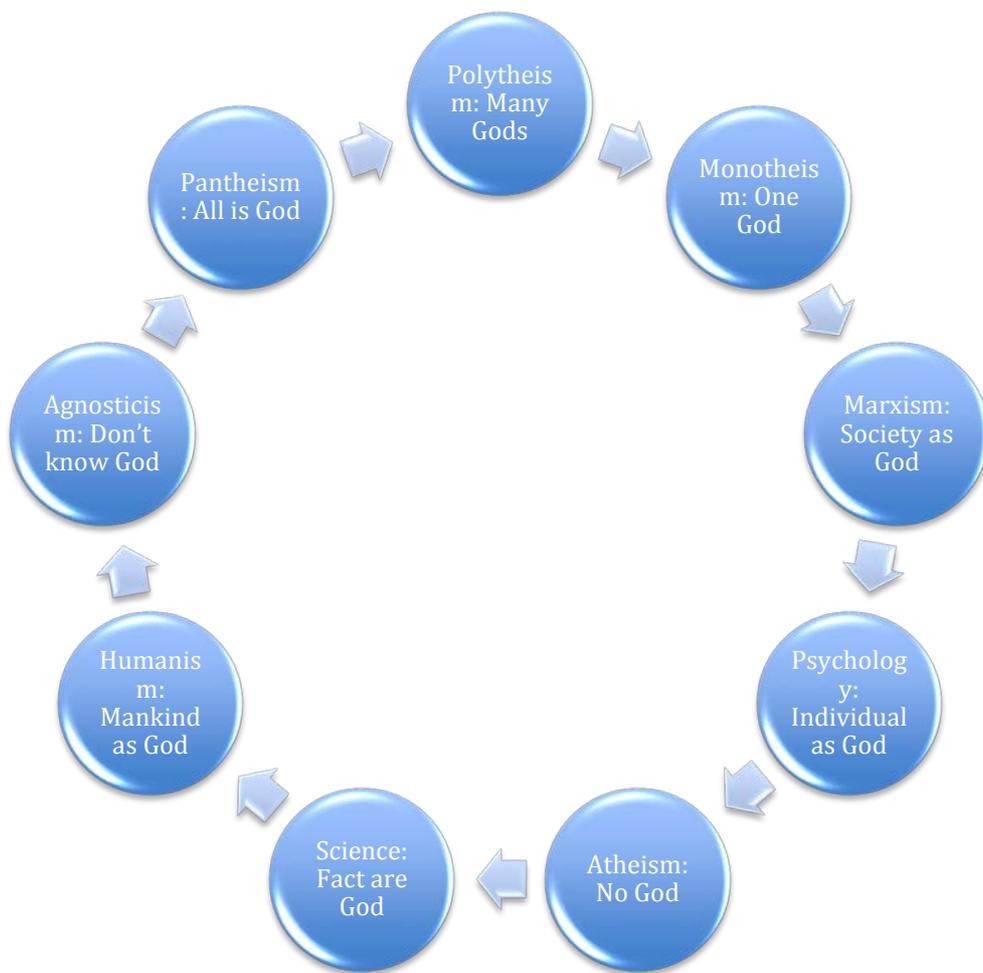


Figure 1: Different definitions of Transcendence

Polytheism: Transcendence is experienced as related to the many different gods and divine representations that need to be appeased. Many clients hold such hidden views. They say prayers to the various deities, icons or saints they believe in and feel they will only be able to surpass their problems if the gods are favourable to them. Polytheistic beliefs often go with a strong sense of community and community support is crucial for transcendence to become possible.

Monotheism: Transcendence of problems will only be possible if the person lives in line with the laws dictated by the God they believe in. If any psychological intervention counters such beliefs it will have much less of an impact than if the intervention is in line with the belief system of the client. Many monotheistic clients believe strongly in the power of prayer and religious discipline in order to obtain transcendence.

Marxism: Transcendence is seen in a social and political context and is often formulated as a class struggle or a social struggle. People with such beliefs will do much better if they can engage with some action that helps them feel that they are dedicated to the cause once again and that their life is of use in this context.

Psychology: Transcendence is seen as coming from individual accomplishment and is only attainable through hard personal work on character, personality and psychological problems. Those who do not adhere to psychology as a worldview can experience the individualistic focus of psychological work as exclusive and alienating. If transcendence is located in the psyche alone, the person's attainment can only come from dedication to good cognitive and psychological functioning.

Atheism: Transcendence may only be arrived at by denial of any form of superior explanatory principle, which means that it is often the sense of approaching life with a certain amount of scepticism that provides the sense of overcoming and going beyond any impasse. Negation and elimination may become important aspects of coping, as also irony and humour.

Science: Transcendence is in the laws of nature, in the facts of life and a careful scrutiny of these is what will bring satisfaction and relief of difficulties. Objective data will override feelings and the intricate nature of the structures of nature will often bring a sense of awe and wonder.

Humanism: Transcendence is something that is achieved by humankind's achievements and capacity to overcome and design new and better forms of life. Human beings are seen as the highest form of intelligence, to which we can always turn for succour, hope and further achievement. Transcendence is often highly correlated with self-reliance or with the admiration of champion human beings.

Agnosticism: Transcendence comes from holding oneself aloof from commitment and from acknowledging the limitations of one's own and anyone else's wisdom or omniscience. Modesty and doubt may be the strongest values that bring a sense of overcoming of difficulties.

Pantheism: Transcendence in pantheism is omnipresent. Everything in and around the world is evidence of miraculous presence and manifests the possibility of the surpassing of previous experience, going beyond the present problems in almost any direction. We find that transcendent powers may be merged with physicality and this idea is often considered sinful and offensive. Some Christians however believe that God can be transcendent as well as immanent.

Psychotherapists are better placed to connect with others if they are able to be open to these different perspectives. This requires them to hold themselves in a position of philosophical pursuit of wisdom. As shown above it is possible for a person to believe in many different ideologies or systems and for them to find ways of overcoming difficulties by following many different paths. From one point of view, it may therefore be a good thing if therapists declare their own value base. From another perspective it would be preferable if therapists were able to transcend such partiality and would accept that different cultures, societies, families and other groups favour different modes of making sense of reality. Once this is understood and taken seriously the work can begin in earnest.

When Kant introduced the idea of the transcendental in his Theory of Knowledge he was referring to an a priori theory of knowledge that would transcend, i.e. go beyond, all other forms of knowledge. He spoke of a transcendental aesthetic theory as well as of a transcendental logic. It was his project to take human thinking beyond all obstacles.

Hegel similarly set out to establish an integrated theory of mind or spirit in which all contradiction and oppositions could be integrated and harmonized, in a theory that combined immanence and transcendence. His dialectic was a way to describe the typical path that progress takes historically as the spirit transcends its own contradictions towards greater truth. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit* he explained this dialectical idealism, which became the inspiration for Marx' dialectical materialism. Hegel's work was a first attempt at overcoming the law of contradiction and the law of the excluded middle.

An example of dialectical thinking is the opposition of being and nothingness, which as a synthesis turns into becoming. In this respect the idea of becoming overcomes, i.e. transcends the contradiction with which we had previously been stuck. Philosophically speaking, psychotherapeutic work is always a search for such transcendence. People come to therapy when they are stuck between a rock and a hard place and they need to find a way to transcend both opposite horns of their dilemma - to find a third way forward.

In a sense we always achieve forward movement merely by being human. We are born and we will die, but these opposites merge throughout our lifetime and become inevitably mixed in the passing of time, while changes take place inside and around us. Allowing change and time as transcendental principles in our lives is a good way to create new faith in existence. The human task is always to take the past and make it fit with the present in some way. As we are doing this we create a new synthesis, which will constitute our future. Tomorrow is the transcendence of today and yesterday.

Husserl moved the idea of transcendence further on in his book 'Formal and Transcendental Logic' (Husserl, 1969), in which he sought to establish the rules of a logic beyond mathematics and current reasoning. His search for a more all-encompassing theory of knowledge that could go beyond the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity led to the methodology of phenomenology, an approach that seeks to transcend our divide between self and world, as well as our divide between fact and experience. It is an excellent method to underpin both psychotherapy and psychological research, as it provides us with a more complete way of approaching our investigations of reality (Deurzen, 2010).

Sartre, drawing on both Hegel and Husserl, applied the idea of transcendence to consciousness itself, showing human consciousness to be exactly that mode of being that constantly surpasses itself towards a further project. We cannot escape from the need to move from one state of consciousness to another as we grasp the world around us and our relationship to it, as well as our relationship to our own selfhood all at the same time.

Sartre, like Heidegger before him, saw human experience as the prototype of consciousness in constant movement. Each described this phenomenon in their own way. (Heidegger's fourfold world became the bedrock for my own four worlds' model).

Sartre's notion of human beings as constantly self re-inventing and re-defining projects is particularly useful when we try to make sense of a person's apparent stuckness in a specific role or situation. He said: 'Man is characterized above all by his going beyond a situation and by what he succeeds in making of what he has been made' (Sartre, 1968:91).

Sartre saw human relations as an example of transcendence, not just in the sense of having to surpass our own reality every day, but also in the sense that each human being is continuously transcended by the consciousness of other human beings, so that we have to find ways of accommodating this further process of opposition, which is both stimulating and challenging. Sartre's initial view was that this led to the choice between dominance, submission and withdrawal (Sartre, 1943) but his later, far more optimistic view, was that we could only gain from learning to transcend opposition by coming to grips with our facility for cooperation, mutuality and generosity (Sartre, 1968).

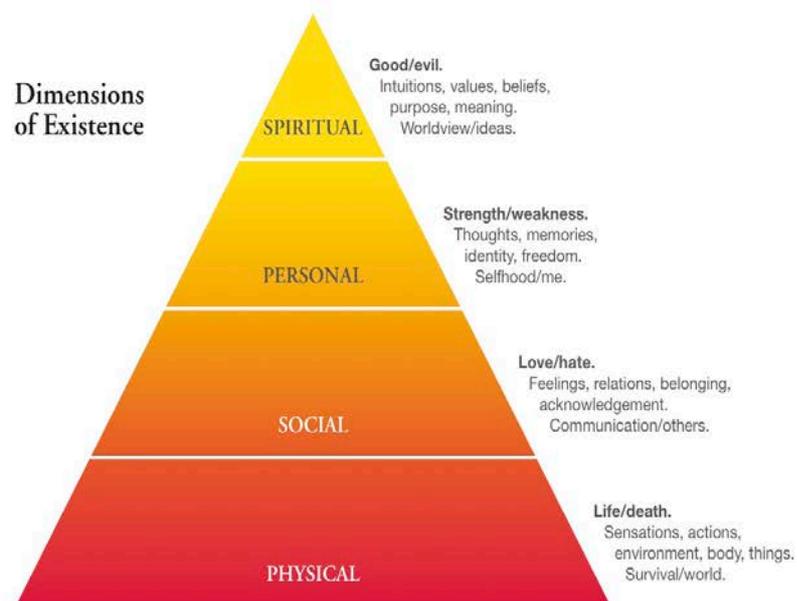


Figure 2. Four dimensions of existence (van Duerzen)

We have projects at many different levels all the time and at each layer of existence, physical, social, personal and spiritual we have to face the contradictions inherent in each if we are to make something of our capacity for transcendence.

Each of us needs to come to terms with the dilemmas, conflicts, contradictions that life presents us with and make something of the differential of energy that this creates in us, rather than collapsing and giving up.

As existential therapists we learn to recognize where our clients are mainly struggling and what the issues are that they are trying to avoid or evade.

The below diagram offers an overview of all the areas of existence faced by therapists.

Overview of conflicts, challenges and paradoxes on four dimensions

World	Umwelt : where?	Mitwelt : how?	Eigenwelt: who?	Uberwelt: why?
Physical: survival	Nature: Life/ Death	Things: Pleasure/ Pain	Body: Health/ Illness	Cosmos: Harmony/ Chaos
Social: affiliation	Society: Love/ Hate	Others: Dominance/ Submission	Ego: Acceptance/ Rejection	Culture: Belonging/ Isolation
Personal: identity	Person: Identity/Freedom	Me: Perfection/ Imperfection	Self: Integrity/ Disintegration	Consciousness: Confidence/ Confusion
Spiritual: meaning	Infinite: Good/ Evil	Ideas: Truth/ Untruth	Spirit: Meaning/ Futility	Conscience: Right/ Wrong

Figure 3. Overview of conflicts and paradoxes on four dimensions

Overcoming contradictions at all these levels keeps us busy for a lifetime, especially since the inexorability of the passing of time changes the equations we are dealing with all the time and bring new elements into play.

The paradox of life is that only if we accept both aspects of these oppositions and contradictions that we can transcend our difficulties and find new and more creative ways to encompass the whole span of human ability and challenge.

It is only when we are willing to face death and pain that we can live life to the full instead of worrying ourselves sick and trying to be healthy and wealthy and comfortable all the time, which leads to a life lived in fear.

It is only when we come to terms with the inevitable rejection and loneliness in our lives that we can learn to approach other people in a real way and learn to understand and be understood, instead of trying to impose our will on others, bullying them, or end up being bullied ourselves.

It is only when we allow ourselves to notice our weakness and vulnerability that real strength is found instead of us covering up our doubts by narcissistic pretence or giving in to our fragility by self destructive denial of ourselves.

It is similarly precisely when we face the potential meaninglessness and futility of living, that we discover our own capacity for creating ethics and value, rather than faltering into apathy

or driving ourselves to fanaticism. The figure below shows how these tensions can be put to good use (see Deurzen and Adams, 2011).

Paradoxes of human existence

	challenge	gain	loss
Physical	Death and pain	Life to the full	Unlived life or constant fear
Social	Loneliness and rejection	Understand and be understood	Bullying or being bullied
Personal	Weakness and failure	Strength and stamina	Narcissism or self destruction
Spiritual	Meaning- Lessness and futility	Finding an ethics to live by	Fanaticism or apathy

Figure 4. From paradox to transcendence

The way forward, as Tillich indicate in his little book of lectures 'The way to Wisdom' is to have courage. In his words, 'Courage is the universal self-affirmation of one's Being in the presence of the threat of non-Being' (Tillich 1952: 163).

Tillich recognized that such courage is hard to come by, but is earned by dealing with life without shirking and with an eye on the process of constant learning that comes from transiting hardship and dealing with problems and difficulties.

Thus, transcendence is ultimately only found in day-to-day living, when we are able to hold our heads high by day and allow ourselves to slump in order to sleep at night, so that we may transcend our troubles and live another day.

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