PART ONE

Practising Existential Psychotherapy: Theoretical Underpinnings
INHERENT DEFINING PRINCIPLES

Clarity arises in the spaces in between. Henning Mankell

In the Introduction to this text, I stated that the practice of existential psychotherapy cannot be reduced to a single and particular structure and methodology. Nor, indeed, can any form of psychotherapy truly be restricted and expressed in such a way.

Nevertheless, it is of pivotal importance to understand that for every contemporary approach to psychotherapy there exist certain inherent defining principles, what phenomenologists might refer to as ‘universal structures’, that permit a form of therapy to be identified and labelled. Psycho-analysis, or cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy (CBT), for example, are each made identifiable and distinctive through such inherent defining principles.

For instance, the assumption of a separate and discrete mental processing system – the unconscious – in contrast to that of conscious processing – would be an inherent defining principle for psycho-analytic thought and practice even if the interpretation and use of the principle might vary both subtly and significantly between differing sub-systems or models within psycho-analysis (Ellenberger, 1970; Smith, 1991). Similarly, within CBT, which consists of a huge diversity of views and, at times, quite starkly contrasting emphases, there also exist certain underlying defining principles that run across, and to this extent unify, its various strands. Critical among these, for instance, would be the shared assumption ‘that cognitive content, processes and structures directly influence or mediate behavior...
and emotion’ (Clark, 1995: 157). Equally, a central characteristic of all forms of CBT is their allegiance to, and reliance upon, formal experimental design as the critical means to both verify and amend clinical hypotheses (Salkovskis, 2002).

As important as they are in providing the means by which both to identify approaches and models and to allow contrasts and comparisons within and between them, these inherent defining principles are rarely made explicit by the majority of practising psychotherapists. This seems somewhat odd since it is through such principles that the practice particular to any specific model emerges – or, at least, is claimed to emerge. Whatever this might say about the state of contemporary psychotherapy, what is important to the present discussion is the acknowledgement that if an agreed-upon set of inherent defining principles for existential psychotherapy can be discerned and described, then it becomes more possible to highlight the various practice-based expressions and extensions of such principles as applied in the therapeutic process. The attempt to respond to such a challenge immediately illuminates two central questions.

First, and most basic, we are bound to ask: What would an application of existential psychotherapy that remained true to its inherent defining principles begin to look like?

Implicit in this question lies a critique of the current state of affairs regarding discourse on the practice of existential psychotherapy both in general and at the formal training level. As was discussed in the Introduction to this text, perhaps because of their reluctance to operationalise and explicate various qualities and skills of practice, existential psychotherapists have tended to take on board attitudes, assumptions, behavioural stances and ‘ways of doing’ psychotherapy that originate from other models and approaches without sufficiently considering how well, if at all, these ‘fit’ with the defining principles of their chosen approach. For example, existential psychotherapists’ stances and attitudes towards issues such as those surrounding therapist disclosure and anonymity and the establishment and maintenance of a specific therapeutic ‘frame’, to name but two, reveal that they tend to adopt numerous structural positions that are indistinguishable from those assumed by psychotherapists from other approaches, and, most typically, from psycho-analytic approaches. Perhaps, with reflection and analysis, this stance might well reveal itself to be both sensible and appropriate. But little consideration has been given to such matters by contemporary existential psychotherapists. Rather, much like Medard Boss’s *dasenanalysis* which maintains the basic operational structure of psycho-analysis but ‘situates’ this within a distinctly different, even contradictory, theoretical system (Boss, 1963, 1979), existential psychotherapists have assumed attitudes, stances and structures borrowed from other traditions and considered them as required for the practice of psychotherapy without sufficient – if any – questioning of, and challenge to, these assumptions.

Might it not be possible, for instance, that at least some of the operational structures being adopted might blunt, impede or contradict the underlying principles of existential psychotherapy? Alternatively, if such structures are truly coherent with the enterprise of existential psychotherapy, then might it not be appropriate to
clarify just what that coherence is and how it may or may not differ from whatever coherence the same set of structural principles might have for any other approach?

Such questions reveal a second set of concerns: What would an existential psychotherapy that was not unnecessarily burdened by the structural attitudes, assumptions and practices that have been derived from other approaches in psychotherapy begin to look like? How would it ‘work’?

When considered together, these questions alert us that we have embarked upon an enterprise that attempts to reconfigure existential psychotherapy as a novel enterprise which does not seek to imitate, assimilate or rely upon the assumptions and practices of either historically pre-existing or concurrent contemporary models or approaches within psychotherapy, and which instead formulates its own stance regarding what it is to be an existential psychotherapist and what it might mean to practise existential psychotherapy.

Obviously, no such enterprise can, or should, either dismiss or deny current standards and ethics of practice as delineated by governing bodies for the profession of psychotherapy. If it wishes to be acknowledged and approved by these bodies, it must remain situated within the facticity of their professional rules and regulations. As such, there is nothing considered or discussed in this text regarding the practice of existential psychotherapy that does not seek to adhere to currently existing standards of practice as presented by the major UK and international Professional Bodies. Nonetheless, as I hope to demonstrate, what remains possible within that body of appropriate professional practice permits the expression of an overarching ‘existential attitude’ towards psychotherapy that may serve both to clarify the overall enterprise of existential psychotherapy as distinct from that of other approaches, and to provide a challenge to the dominant set of structural assumptions regarding the practice of psychotherapy in general.

At its broadest level, this ‘existential attitude’ seeks to bring back to contemporary notions of psychotherapy a stance that re-emphasises a crucial aspect that is contained within the original meaning of therapeia – namely, the enterprise of ‘attending to’ another via the attempt to be beside, or with, that other as he or she is being and acts in or upon the world (Evans, 1981). It is this attempt that, I believe, underpins the broadly shared enterprise of all existential psychotherapists.

It has to be acknowledged that when considering what has been, and continues to be, written about the practice of existential psychotherapy (however limited this may be) a reader is likely to be confronted with diverse, perhaps innumerable, forms of its description and expression. This variety has led existential psychotherapists to conclude (perhaps even ‘celebrate’) that there is no one single way of practising existential therapy. Further, their conclusions acknowledge a conviction, undoubtedly derived from existential phenomenology, that cultural, historical, professional and individual views, variations and emphases are inevitable and that there exist as many unique expressions of existential psychotherapy as there are unique beings who engage in and practise it.

Considered from this perspective of uniqueness and diversity, it would appear to be difficult to claim, much less provide evidence for, the existence of shared
underlying principles in the practice of existential psychotherapy – unless, I suppose, one were to argue that the one governing principle was that of avoiding shared principles.

However, if an alternative to the above conclusion does exist, as this text argues it does, how might one begin to ‘tease it out’ of the presenting instances of distinctive divergence and variation? It is my view that the starting point to a solution is made possible via existential-phenomenological theory itself.

Existential practitioners are correct in asserting that a key philosophical principle of existential phenomenology emphasises the uniqueness of each being’s experience of relating with, and construing meaning from, the world. However, just as importantly (though often minimised or missed by those drawn to this philosophy), existential phenomenology also stresses that the very possibility of unique expressions and experiences of being and reflections upon being arise from an over-arching set of universal ‘givens’, be they ‘structural invariants’ as suggested by Edmund Husserl (Ihde, 1986a, 1986b) or ontological ‘existentials’ as presented by Martin Heidegger (Cohn, 1997; Condrau, 1998).

A useful analogy here might be that of ‘the snowflake’. Each snowflake, it would appear, is entirely unique. No one snowflake’s shape or appearance is exactly the same as any other. At the same time, however, all snowflakes come into being through the same specific set of programmed structural invariants. Each unique snowflake is also a universal snowflake in that it contains and exhibits all the necessary invariants required in order ‘to be’ a snowflake.

If we keep this analogy in mind, we can ask whether existential psychotherapy shares something that is akin to this principle. That is to say, within the (potentially) infinite unique expressions of existential psychotherapy, do there also exist invariant underlying shared principles that permit a particular unique expression to be identified as ‘being’ existential psychotherapy?

I believe that there are, and I would argue that this belief is shared, however tacitly, by those who claim to practise existential psychotherapy, on the simple grounds that in the very act of naming what we do as ‘existential psychotherapy’ we are at the very least acknowledging an assumption of the existence of underlying shared principles which underpin all of the unique expressions or forms of existential psychotherapy.

So . . . The obvious question arises. If it is being claimed that these principles exist, just what are they? I propose to suggest that there exist three pivotal hypotheses and assumptions that together provide the key underlying principles of existential phenomenology and, hence, of existential psychotherapy.

THE THREE KEY UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES OF EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Purely objective truth is nowhere to be found . . . . The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything. William James
Phenomenology, as a unique philosophical system, arose in the early years of the twentieth century. Its initiator, Edmund Husserl, sought to establish phenomenology as the fundamental philosophy for all scientific investigation (Husserl, 1965). In attempting such, both Husserl and, subsequently, his principal assistant, Martin Heidegger, came to challenge a foundational assumption that ran throughout scientific enquiry: the ‘dualistic split’ between subject and object upon which modern-day natural science is based. Instead, existential phenomenology proposed that all reflections, analyses and interpretations regarding every aspect of human existence are inter-relationally derived.

This view stands in stark opposition to the assertions of natural science regarding the investigator’s ability to consider, describe and manipulate the focus of investigation from an impersonal and detached standpoint so that, through research and investigation, the true, factual and objective nature of reality can be discerned. In contrast, existential phenomenology proposes that no investigator, no matter how seemingly objective, can truly exclude him or her self from that which is being investigated – be it the study of essences or objects, or of being and existence. Indeed, we are all enmeshed in an inevitable and influential matrix of inter-relations. Just as the investigator influences the focus of investigation in any number of ways both subtle and obvious, so, too, does the act of investigation impact upon the investigator in ways and means that cannot be foreseen. And, further, any particular act of investigation influences not only that particular investigator and that specific focus of investigation, but also ‘ripples’ on to all investigators and foci of investigation.

Such conclusions, while by no means alien to numerous non-Western cultures and philosophies, remain incompatible with contemporary Western culture’s abiding embrace of dualism. Indeed, this view is so embedded within every aspect of Western culture that any alternative explanation is limited by its dominating influence. The English language, for example, would seem to be structured in such a way that attempts to articulate the existential-phenomenological counter-argument to assumptions of objectivity derived from natural science must resort to statements that are inevitably imbued with an inherent dualism. For instance, the term most commonly employed to address existential phenomenology’s basic stance of indivisible relatedness, being-in-the-world, still suggests, in spite of the hyphenation between the words, a conjunction of two separate and distinct entities, namely ‘the being’ and ‘the world’. On further consideration, even novel terms designed to express indivisibility cannot be defined without recourse to a language imbued with dualistic dividedness. And as if such obstacles were not sufficient, it is evident that the ‘alien language’ of existential phenomenology adds substantially to the (in my opinion, erroneous) view held by many that the ideas and concepts propounded by this philosophy are difficult to comprehend, rather too abstract and deeply limited with regard to any useful applications.

Even so, in spite of such difficulties, the philosophical arguments and concerns of existential phenomenology continue to tantalise many of those who come upon them and, by so doing, provoke an examination of their implications not only for
philosophy itself, but for the related arenas of psychology and, more recently, psychotherapy. Therefore, while acknowledging the many difficulties, be they cultural, linguistic or conceptual, that arise immediately in any attempt to address and clarify existential phenomenology’s key arguments and assumptions, let us nonetheless attempt to engage with them.

The First Principle: Relatedness (Inter-relation)

The world and I are within one another. Maurice Merleau-Ponty

The principle of relatedness or inter-relation is so pivotal to the whole rationale of existential phenomenology that its presence resonates through every point and argument presented by the approach. Because it is so foundational, and at the same time so counter-intuitive to Western thought, it requires extended consideration.

At its simplest, this principle argues that all of our reflections upon and knowledge, awareness and experienced understanding of the world, of others and of our selves emerge out of, and through, an irreducible grounding of relatedness. We cannot, therefore, understand or make sense of human beings – our selves included – on their own or in isolation, but always and only in and through their inter-relational context. As will be discussed later and in Part Two of this book, this principle has enormous implications for the practice of existential psychotherapy, not least because it no longer permits existential psychotherapists to focus their attention on their client in isolation. Indeed, via this principle, it can be argued that existential psychotherapy’s focus is not even primarily upon the client per se, but rather on the particular ways through which relatedness expresses itself: first, through the narratives of the experience of being that are provided by the client and, second and no less importantly, through the psychotherapist’s and client’s currently lived experience of relatedness as it unfolds, and enfolds them both during the therapeutic encounter.

The significance of, and implications arising from, this critical first principle are often minimised or missed entirely by commentators on existential psychotherapy as well as, I suspect, by a substantial number of those who claim to practise it. For, if we consider the immediate consequences of this first principle we are confronted with a major challenge to the related notions of subjectivity and the individual.

Subjectivity

Why should the healthy hand attend to the wounded foot? The Buddha

A recent issue of the Journal of Consciousness Studies was dedicated to the work of the physicist and Fellow of the Royal Society, John Ziman, and to his writings on intersubjectivity (Ziman’s preferred term for relatedness) in particular. One of Ziman’s papers, ‘No man is an island’ challenges ‘the axiom of subjectivity’ (Ziman, 2006:18) that runs through scientific enquiry.
Specifically, Ziman asks his readers to ‘suppose that the mutual recognition and understanding required for interpersonal communication and sociability is treated as a basic life-world characteristic’ (Ziman, 2006: 22). Making his argument more explicit, Ziman adds: ‘I have not come across any evidence that the subjective mode of consciousness is prior – in the species or in the phenotypical modern individual – to its intersubjective copartner’ (ibid.: 23). This view, while still a radical challenge to contemporary scientific investigation, is easily embraced within the first principle of existential phenomenology.

Of relevance to these points are the comments provided by the anthropologist Alan Macfarlane in his response to Ziman’s paper (Macfarlane, 2006: 43–52). He writes:

With the growth of comparative anthropology it became clear that our individualistic, capitalistic, self-consciousness, rather than being the normal state of things, is indeed a western peculiarity, something produced by the strange form of individualistic, monotheistic religion and western law and economy. When anthropologists reported back on what they had found in South American or South East Asian jungles, or in New Guinea or among Australian aborigines, they described relational, inter-subjective, world views not wholly different from that which Ziman is suggesting. (Macfarlane, 2006: 46)

Macfarlane acknowledges that ‘these societies could be ignored as to a certain extent peripheral vestiges of a disappearing world’ (ibid.: 47). Such conclusions would be erroneous.

As anthropologists and historians turned their attention increasingly to large, literate, market-based, peasant civilizations outside western Europe they found that they also were based on the premise of inter-subjectivity . . . . One example was Chinese civilization . . . . A second was India . . . . A third comes from the attempts to understand Japanese civilization . . . . (Ibid.: 47)

Paralleling these arguments, the psychologist and philosopher Riccardo Manzotti has recently argued for a process-oriented framework of human perception in which ‘the classic separation between subject and object must be reconceived so that the two, while maintaining their identities as different perspectives on a process, actually occur as unity during perception’ (Manzotti, 2006: 7).

Manzotti argues that the assumption of separateness between subject and object creates explanatory problems for both the representational and phenomenal aspects of the neural processes involved. As a counter-example that serves as an entry point to his developing theory of perceptual processing, Manzotti considers the rainbow as ‘a condition where the distinction between observed object/event and the observing object/event is not evident’ (Manzotti, 2006: 12).

When the sun is sufficiently low on the horizon and projects its rays at an appropriate angle against a cloud with a large enough volume of drops of water suspended in the atmosphere, an observer sees an arch with all the spectrum of colours . . . . The position of the rainbow depends on the position the observer . . . . It makes no sense to speak of a rainbow as something that is physically out there . . . . The notion of a rainbow as an autonomous object/event/state of affairs is thus discarded in favour of a process version of the rainbow. (Ibid.: 12)
Manzotti argues that the rainbow does not exist independently of the act of observation. Rather than a 'thing', it is a process of relation between perceived and perceiver. Considered in this process-like way, all acts of perception and all that is perceived reveal their inherent relatedness. Perceiver and perceived, subject and object, self and others ‘do not enjoy a separate autonomous existence’ (ibid.: 14).

The various arguments briefly summarised above resonate with existential phenomenology’s assertion that subjectivity is just one variant form or expression of the more foundational state of relatedness or inter-relational being. In this sense, subjectivity can be understood as an expression of relatedness that seeks to minimise or dismiss its very grounding in relatedness and which, instead, seeks to impose a relational divide upon one’s experience of being through the distinction and separation of ‘self’ from ‘other’ (or ‘world’), as if each were independent in terms of its existence, identity and meaning.

From the standpoint of existential phenomenology, ‘subjectivity’ does not arise or exist in contrast to, or distinct from, relatedness, nor can it be placed alongside relatedness as a separate and alternative mode of being and experiencing. Rather, subjectivity is seen as a particular, perhaps culturally specific, emergent consequence and expression of relatedness.

**The individual**

It is not that there is experience because there is an individual, but that there is an individual because there is experience. Kitaro Nishida

As with contemporary Western thought in general, the dominant ethos of psychotherapy assumes the primacy of the individual subject. Is is common for theories to suggest that it is only once the individual has ‘found’, ‘accepted’, or ‘authenticated’ him or her self, and by so doing begun to deal with the issues and obstacles impeding or imposing upon the experience and expression of one’s ‘true’, ‘authentic’ and/or ‘self-actualising’ potential for being, that he or she is capable of focusing upon and addressing the possibilities of relationship with others and the world in general. Existential phenomenology (and, as a consequence, existential psychotherapy) takes a distinctively different stance in that it argues that no self can be ‘found’, nor individual ‘emerge’, other than via the a priori inter-relational grounding from which our unique sense of being arises.

Following on from the previous discussion on subjectivity, it becomes apparent that in contrast to the dominant tendency to view the individual as the a priori source, or pre-relational constituent, through which relations become possible, existential phenomenology proposes the reverse of this argument. While this reversal might initially seem at best odd and at worst absurd by readers and commentators, it may begin to be considered less so in light of ongoing research on mirror neurons.

In a recent paper, Becchio and Bertone write that just over a decade ago, ‘a particular class of motor neurons was discovered in a sector of the ventral premotor cortex of monkeys, called F5 . . . . [These neurons] fire when the recorded monkey
observes another monkey – or even the experimenter – performing a similar action. These neurons were designated as “mirror neurons” (Becchio & Bertone, 2005: 21). Mirror neurons have been located in both primates and humans and have generated a great deal of interest because they appear to ‘map actions in a multisubjective neural format neutral with respect to the agent . . . . The action can be ascribed to both the executor and the observer . . . [and] the action representation is immediately shared between self and other’ (ibid.: 23). In other words, the mirror neurons of a particular subject (for instance, an infant human being) ‘mirror’ or reflect the behaviour of another (for instance, the infant’s mother) as though it were the subject (the infant) who had performed the action (Gallese, 2003).

The significance of mirror neurons to this discussion is that they provide the means to consider an alternative explanation for the development of an individual’s awareness of, and connection with, others. Indeed, the noted social scientist Helga Nowotny has gone so far as to state that ‘there is now some good empirical evidence for the neural basis of intersubjectivity “as an irreducible natural phenomenon”’ (Nowotny, 2006: 65).

A similar conclusion appears in a recent text by the developmental psychologist and psychotherapist, Daniel Stern (2004). Stern, too, addresses the findings regarding mirror neurons and considers these as neural correlates of, and implicit evidence for, an intersubjective matrix suggestive of the human capacity ‘to imitate, understand, empathise with and synchronise with others’ (Mearns & Cooper, 2005: 12). Indeed, Stern posits that all human beings share a motivational system whose aim is that of intersubjective knowing (Stern, 2004).

The study of mirror neurons raises a significant dilemma for currently dominant Western assumptions. The irresolvable question arising from dualistic perspectives is how each individual subject is able to discern the existence of others, or, more generally, the existence of a separate and distinct external reality. With the discovery of mirror neurons, and their implications, the problem is reversed: the critical question now becomes how such a boundary or divide comes into being.

In line with this view, the philosopher David Midgley (commenting upon the work of John Ziman discussed above) proposes that as well as access one another’s experiences, we also participate in them and, in participation ‘become who we are’ (Midgley, 2006). In taking this view, Midgley agrees with Ziman’s contention that the ‘bias towards atomic individualism not only bedevils the human and social sciences: it distorts the whole philosophy of nature’ (Ziman, 2006: 21). By so doing he successfully summarises existential phenomenology’s radical challenge ‘that individual consciousness is actually a part or subsystem of a larger [inter-relational] consciousness’ (Midgley, 2006: 100).

Within the arena of psychotherapy, perhaps the most radical reconsideration of currently dominant views surrounding the individual can be found in the writings of a philosopher whose ideas have had a major impact upon existential phenomenology – Martin Buber.

Buber’s now famous contrast between ‘I–It’ and ‘I–Thou’ relations can be most directly understood in the following way: one can approach ‘the other’ from the
standpoint wherein the other is experienced as a separate object of one’s experience and self-consciousness such that the other’s meaning and relation to the scrutinising ‘I’ can be shaped and formulated via the imposition of the ‘I’’s preferred meaning stance. Alternatively, one can approach ‘the other’ as an inter-related co-subject with whom the ‘I’ is in a perpetual dialogical encounter through which mutually revealing inter-relational meaning possibilities unfold themselves (Buber, 1970, 2002).

The former is an ‘I–It’ attitude that is grounded in separateness and control. The latter is an ‘I–Thou’ attitude that is grounded in inseparable relatedness and whose focus lies upon the meanings emergent between persons. If the former demands that the ‘I’ must ‘fix’ him or her self in an attitude of authority, the latter equally demands that the ‘I’ remains open to the reconstituting and redefining of its own meaning base via the attitude taken toward the other. The former attitude equally objectifies both the ‘I’ and the other (‘It’); the latter reveals that both the ‘I’ and the other (‘Thou’) co-exist as an inseparable inter-relation whose truthful meanings are not ‘handed down’, directed toward, imposed or predetermined via a process of objectification (Buber, 1970).

Buber was also careful to distinguish ‘persons’ from ‘individuals’. His view of the person served as an expression of what it is to be human – a being who inhabits an inseparable relation with the world, and is an expression of that relation. He was deeply critical of Western culture’s (and psychotherapy’s) elevation of the individual per se. He railed against the sort of ‘fascism of self-autonomy’ that runs rampant through Western thought and is so alien in its views from those of so many other philosophies and systems in the world (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990).

For Buber, being a person is far more than simply individuating. Being a person means being ‘in real reciprocity with the world in all the points in which the world can meet man’ (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990: 63). As Buber stated: ‘I’m against individuals and for persons’. And, in a similar vein, argued that one may make him or her self ‘more and more an individual without making him [or her] more and more human’ (ibid.). Indeed, Buber continually endeavoured to remind us that we become our selves through relation. For Buber, ‘In the beginning is relation’ (Buber, 1970: 32).

From his own early experiences in the world of theatre, Buber distinguished the actor who can merely imitate a role with the actor who lives within the role and, thereby experiences the polarity between him or her self and the role he or she plays (Friedman, 1982). This distinction provided Buber with the basis for what he would eventually term inclusion. While he never provided a precise definition for this term, in part because of his conviction that it could not ever be fully captured by definition, Buber sought to express via inclusion the experience of relatedness: the experiencing of the other in the relationship without either overwhelming and shaping the other’s ‘otherness’ so that it becomes a mere extension of ‘I’, while at the same time neither neglecting, minimising nor abdicating one’s own presence in the relationship (Buber, 2002).
Thus, the great paradox presented by Buber is that the individual truly emerges and experiences the uniqueness of his or her being not prior to, or through the relinquishing of, relatedness but rather by the embracing of an inclusionary relatedness. In this, I suggest, Buber was uncommonly prescient. Today, the constant blathering of marketeers and politicians about the sanctity and protection of ‘the individual’, and the wants or pursuits associated with it, has permitted an unprecedented and highly manipulable allegiance to blandness, mediocrity and predictability in people’s goals, aspirations and experience of their existence. In minimising, if not removing, the foundational constituent of relatedness from our understanding of individuality, our relations – be they with self or others – have become all too commonly enmeshed in the objectifying strictures of ‘I–It’ encounters.

Relatedness as ‘worlding’

The objective world simply is, it does not happen. Only to the gaze of my consciousness, crawling upward along the line of my body, does a section of this world come to life as a fleeting image in space which continuously changes in time. Hermann Weyl

Earlier, I considered the difficulty of conveying the notion of relatedness. I suggested that this difficulty lies not only in the novelty or complexity of this view but also in the difficulties arising from language itself. I argued that the English language immediately imposes a ‘split’ upon all discourse that seeks to express relatedness in a direct way. If I were to state, for instance, that both I and you are both always responsible for whatever happens between us, I would be attempting to communicate a key inter-relational axiom via the ‘split’ language of ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘us’. Such an attempt blunts and diminishes the intended inter-relational meaning of the statement; in effect it seeks to express relatedness via a language that, at best, obscures the inseparability that lies between or, perhaps more appropriately, encompasses, ‘I’ and ‘you’.

Acknowledging this, I might be more accurate in stating that the principle of relatedness leads us to the conclusion that ‘I–you’ always affects ‘‘I–you.” Or, that ‘I–you’ chooses and is always responsible for what happens to ‘I–you’ through the inter-relational stance that “I–you” takes.’ Assuming that ‘I–you’ even remotely understood what has just been communicated (which is itself an enormous assumption) at some point or other ‘I–you’ might well ask: ‘Who or what or where or when or how or even why is the constituent ‘I’ or the constituent ‘you’ that is contained in this notion of ‘I–you’?” And, at that point, any response would once again be at a level wherein a ‘split’ or isolationist focus was imposed upon the attempted explanation.

Indeed, on reflection, the very terms ‘relatedness’ and ‘inter-relation’ impose an implicit split. If we state that there is a foundational and inevitable inter-relational unity between what we call ‘subject’ and ‘object’, the language we employ works against our enterprise and imposes a division at the heart of our inter-relational statement. A major part of the problem is that what is being attempted is a description
and communication of some thing – be it ‘I’ or ‘you’. Instead, what relatedness posits is a description or communication that is more akin to a process. Or, to put it another way, what is being pointed to is more verb-like than it is noun-like. In considering relatedness from a noun-like perspective, tensions and problems come into being that complicate an already confusing enterprise.

In some ways, this confusion can be seen to have its parallel in the attempts to communicate concepts and ideas from quantum physics. For instance, the oft-noted quantum conclusion that light is both ‘wave-like’ and ‘particle-like’ expresses a similar dilemma in communication and, as well, provokes (for some at least) the added confusion of attempting to ‘hold’ what appears to be a contradictory statement as ‘true’. If we consider the many conceptual conundrums to do with time, space, locality and materiality thrown up by quantum physics it is both evident and somewhat startling to note how closely such conundrums resonate with the inter-relational principle that underpins existential phenomenology (Bohm and Hiley, 1995).

The terms we employ to grasp and express relatedness encase and restrain, impose a passivity and or closure upon a notion that yearns to communicate movement, openness and a sort of perpetual ‘becoming’, rather than point towards a captured entity or structure. In like fashion, the terms that existential phenomenologists have tended to apply, such as ‘being-in-the-world’ or ‘figure/ground’, remove all sense of movement and indeterminacy, and remain too static for that which they seek to embrace.

In light of this, and as a partial attempt to counter such tendencies, I have elected to employ the term ‘worlding’ as a means of expressing relatedness from an experiential perspective. Although the term can be found in the English translation of Martin Heidegger’s Being and Time (1962), the use I make of it should not be confused with Heidegger’s, even though some points of similarity do exist. As inadequate and clumsy as it still is, ‘worlding’, as I employ the term, at least alerts us to an active and continuing process-like foundational principle that underpins existential phenomenology. Worlding refers to the ongoing, ever-shifting process-like, linguistically elusive living of being.

In contrast, when, as human beings, we reflect upon and attempt to explicate worlding, we can only do so through the imposing of structural limitations that encase the process-like activity so that it is essentialised and appears as ‘thing-like’. This structural containment of worlding is expressed via the term ‘the worldview’. The worldview expresses the structural consequence of all human reflections upon worlding which, necessarily, must always be viewed from a specific point of focus (such as ‘self’, ‘other’, ‘subject’, ‘object’). In doing so, the attempted expression of process-like worlding through the essentialising structure of the worldview imposes an inevitable ‘split’ perspective in a structural sense (what it is) and as well in how that point of focus both experiences being and is experienced as being.

The distinction between worlding and the worldview will be discussed further below. However, for now it is essential to understand that even this ‘split’, structural
point of focus remains an expression of \textit{worlding}. \textit{Worlding} is – regardless of the essence-like appearance imposed upon it. Indeed, it is only through \textit{worlding} that appearance and structure can emerge. Thus, the questions regarding \textit{worlding} can never be about ‘how do I ‘world’ more or better?’ or ‘what is lacking in my ‘worlding’?’ Rather, our questions (and experiences of unease or dissatisfaction) can only be concerned with the structural \textit{point of focus} being adopted with regard to the experience of \textit{worlding} – that is to say, the worldview. As will be discussed in \textit{Part Two}, it is this latter set of questions, centred on the degree to which the worldview adequately reflects the process-like experience of \textit{worlding}, that forms the focus of investigation for existential psychotherapy.

As a simple analogy that might express concretely what is being discussed, consider the following: Construct a mental picture of the world. If you now single out any aspect of it, say, ‘Italy’, or ‘the Pacific Ocean’ or ‘Fremantle, Western Australia’, it will stand out as a structural \textit{focus point}. This structural focus point permits a view of the world from its particular and unique perspective. Equally, it permits a view of that structural focus point \textit{itself} either from its own perspective or from the perspective of any other particular structural focus point, or from the perspective of the whole world structural focus point.

It is never the case, however, that the singling out of any structural focus point \textit{removes} it from the world. It may ‘stand out’ temporarily as a structural focus point, but it cannot be said that it is no longer part of the world. The focus point/structure is always \textit{in and of} the world, just as the world would not be ‘the world’ if that particular structural focus point were removed from it.

At the same time, it is evident that the structural focus point that has been highlighted is in many ways \textit{an artifice}, \textit{a construct}. It is not fixed and static, but only appears to be so. Instead, it is continually changing not only though the impact of various ‘forces of nature’ that erode and re-shape it, both slowly over time or in sudden cataclysmic upheaval – but also via human-imposed variables. A country called Moravia, for instance, might once have been a potential structural focus point but, for the present at least, is no longer.

Equally, and more challenging, as any aspect of the structural focus point alters, be it by the influences of nature or humankind, so, too, does this change the world, both in terms of each potential structural focus point and as a whole. Thus, both the world and any highlighted structural focus points \textit{are constantly becoming}.

In addition, it can be seen that this ‘constant becoming’ is not truly divisible or separable in terms of structural focus point or world. The ‘constant becoming’ of the structural focus point \textit{is} the ‘constant becoming’ of the world, just as the ‘constant becoming’ of the world \textit{is} the ‘constant becoming’ of any and every particular structural focus point.

When the structurally imposed restrictions upon ‘constant becoming’ are removed, the ever-shifting flux of being can be expressed in terms such as distinctions that served as the focus of our investigation break down and the only terms that begin to ‘process-like’, ‘action-based’. \textit{Worlding}, I propose, is another, perhaps more adequate, term.
In spite of its limitations, I hope that something sufficient has been expressed regarding the notion of worlding as an ongoing, indivisible process and of the *worldview* as its reflectively-construed structural counterpart. Equally, I hope that readers have understood that, however it is considered, worlding reveals a foundational relatedness in all human reflections upon and experiences of existence.

I will return to the discussion of these terms when considering their specific implications for the practice of existential psychotherapy. For the moment, let me end this necessary, if still somewhat lengthy account of the first principle of existential phenomenology, with a brief summary.

**Relatedness: a summary**

What is spoken is never, and in no language, what is said. Martin Heidegger

The first general principle that defines and identifies existential phenomenology is that of relatedness or inter-relation. This principle asserts us that all human reflections and investigations of and upon any aspect of existence, as well as all conclusions derived from them, originate from a foundational inter-relational grounding.

This assumption of a foundational relatedness challenges the dominant Western tendency to divide and isolate and thereby generate a ‘split’ between what are, as a consequence, viewed as distinct and separate ‘subject’ and ‘object’ which may or may not relate to one another or whose way of relating may impact on both, or or one or the other alone. Existential phenomenology rejects this split between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ as an originating source-point and instead argues that this seeming ‘split-ness’ is but one particular expression of relatedness. It denies the possibility of ‘non-relatedness’ and instead suggests that the avoidance or denial of relatedness is itself, again, one form or expression of relatedness. It denies that the impact, direction and consequence of any form of relatedness can be isolated, and instead proposes that *any* aspect of relatedness inevitably impacts upon *every* aspect or expression of relatedness.

Although Western thought is not predisposed to the central ideas surrounding this first principle, nonetheless they lend themselves to various types of investigation and, while complex, are reasonably open to comprehension. Much of their immediate difficulty arises from the attempt to describe and communicate this principle both as process and as a structure. Attempts to do so have generated, and continue to generate, all manner of confusion and have given rise to difficult, if highly rewarding descriptive narratives as well as to any number of half-baked ‘deep and meaningless’ guru-like statements and descriptors. Whether my preferred term of *worlding* (and its relation to the worldview) will turn out to be an instance of the former or the latter remains to be seen.

**The Second Principle: Existential Uncertainty**

That which is in opposition is in concert and from things that differ comes the most beautiful harmony. Heraclitus
The second principle that runs through all existential phenomenology states that if all of one’s reflective experience, knowledge and awareness of self, others and the world in general arises through and within relatedness then what is revealed is an inevitable and inescapable uncertainty or lack of completeness in any and all of our reflections.

Why should this be so? Because in placing all reflective experience within an inter-relational matrix, those reflections upon existence, be it in general or having to do with ‘my own’ existence, can no longer be held solely by me or exist in some way ‘within’ me. Rather, meaning-reflections emerging through inter-relation expose me to the many uncertainties of relatedness – uncertainties having to do with meaning, control, responsibility and so forth. From an inter-relational perspective, no one structural focus-point (such as ‘I’) can ever fully determine with complete and final certainty what and how other structural focus-points (such as ‘the world’ or ‘others’) will be, nor can it fully determine what and how it, itself, will be since, as a structural focus-point, it can never remove or separate itself from its counter parts.

Does this suggest that existential phenomenology recognises absolutely no certainties whatsoever? Not at all. There exist any number of certainties that are requirement conditions for the maintenance and continuity of life. For instance, it is certain that all human beings must be able to breathe, take in nourishment and excrete waste products if they are to continue to exist. Similarly, death is a certainty for all human beings. Acknowledging this, existential-phenomenology nonetheless argues that each human being’s lived experience of such certainties is open to multiple possibilities – and hence remains uncertain. For example, even with the certainty that my life is moving towards its inevitable end, I remain uncertain in that not only do I not know when that ending will be or how I will occur, but also my very stance toward this ending, my way of relating to the certainty of death is always open to differing stances and attitudes that may arise and change unpredictably throughout my life.

Although he could never be said have been an existential philosopher, and would almost certainly have been displeased to be so labelled, it is my view that, in his theory of value pluralism, Isaiah Berlin provides the most insightful analysis of several key implications arising from this second principle. Berlin’s principal argument criticised the general Western assumption that

the answers to all the great questions must of necessity agree with one another; for they must correspond with reality, and reality is a harmonious whole. If this were not so, there is chaos at the heart of things: which is unthinkable. Liberty, equality, property, knowledge, security, practical wisdom, purity of character, sincerity, kindness, rational self-love, all these ideals . . . cannot conflict with one another; if they appear to do so it must be due to some misunderstanding of their properties. No truly good thing can ever be finally incompatible with any other; indeed they virtually entail one another; men cannot be wise unless they are free or free unless they are just, happy, and so forth.

Here, we conspicuously abandon the voice of experience – which records very obvious conflicts of ultimate ideals – and encounter a doctrine that stems from older theological roots – from the belief that unless all the positive virtues are harmonious with one another, or at least not incompatible, the notion of the Perfect Entity – whether it be called nature of God or Ultimate Reality – is not conceivable. (Berlin, 2006, quoted in Gray, 2006: 20)
In a recent article on Berlin's theory of value pluralism as expounded in his posthumous book, Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought (Berlin, 2006), John Gray emphasises Berlin's consistent rejection of the idea – which Berlin rightly viewed as being fundamental in the Western intellectual tradition – that all genuine human values must be combinable in a harmonious whole. In this view conflicts of values are symptoms of error that in principle can always be resolved: if human values seem to come into conflict that is only because our understanding of them is imperfect, or some of the contending values are spurious; and where such conflicts appear there is a single right answer that – if only they can find it – all reasonable people are bound to accept. (Gray, 2006: 20)

Berlin's counter-argument to this view asserts that, on the contrary, 'conflicts of values are real and inescapable, with some of them having no satisfactory solution. He advanced this view not as a form of skepticism but as a universal truth: conflicts of value go with being human (Gray, 2006: 20).

From a political standpoint, Berlin contended, this Enlightenment idea of an ideal and monistic harmony and perfection in human values generated the novel expressions of tyranny that dominated the century just past. For at the heart of this idea lay ‘the intellectual roots of some of the major political disasters of the twentieth century’ (Gray, 2006: 20). When considering the excesses of political intolerance and curtailment of freedom of expression associated with twentieth-century Communist regimes, for example, Berlin’s view was that these could not ‘be adequately explained as a product of backwardness, or of errors in the application of Marxian theory. It was the result of a resolute attempt to realize an Enlightenment utopia – a condition of society in which no serious conflict any longer exists’ (ibid.: 21).

The point being made by Berlin addresses the key concerns and assumptions to be found in the second principle of existential phenomenology. Together, they ask us to embrace existence’s lack of completeness, and the inevitable failure of any attempt to complete it by realizing all our possibilities (Cohn, 2002).

The primary consequence of an inter-relational grounding exposes the inevitable uncertainty and openness of existence. At any moment, all prior knowledge, values, assumptions and beliefs regarding self, others and the world in general may be ‘opened’ to challenge, reconsideration or dissolution. In addition, the embodied attitudinal and affective experience of being that accompanies this shift might also challenge and surprise or disturb. Relatively common statements such as ‘I never thought I would act like that’, or ‘She seemed to turn into someone I didn’t know’, or ‘Recent world events convince me that I just can’t make sense of things any longer’ point us to positions that at least temporarily acknowledge the uncertainties of being.

What this second principle argues is that existential uncertainty remains a constant given of human experience rather than revealing itself to be just an occasional and temporary consequence of unusual circumstances. It suggests that the structural point of view we make of self, others and the world in general is always
incomplete, unfixed in any final shape or form – and, hence, uncertain. Every moment of worlding is novel and unique, never to be repeated, never identical to any other. In contrast, the worldview provides structurally focused reflections regarding any aspect of worlding that suggest, at least in part, an essentialising stasis or constancy over time. In this sense, the worldview provides the basic structural means through which the full impact of the inherent uncertainty accompanying the experience of worlding can be partially withstood and allayed. This limiting of uncertainty should not be understood solely in terms of ‘neurotic defence patterns’ and the like. Simply because it is a structure, and hence, of necessity, requiring some degree of fixedness and coherence over time, the worldview cannot embrace the total impact of uncertainty. To do so would set about its own.

The principle of uncertainty is both shattering in its implications and initially counter-intuitive. For example, I might say to myself: ‘I know that since the age of seven I have loathed the taste of eggs. I know, therefore, that just as yesterday I rejected the possibility of eating eggs, I will do so again today, and will continue to do so tomorrow and almost certainly all the remaining tomorrows in my life. And even if it should come to pass that for some reason or other I am placed in a position at some point in the future where the eating of eggs becomes a necessity, I might do so but I will certainly continue to loathe their taste and feel a physical revulsion at the thought of eating one.’ What the second principle insists upon is the acknowledgement of a basic uncertainty regarding this certain stance I currently adopt. That ‘I’ have adopted it, places this stance within the reflective arena of the worldview. From the worldview’s structural perspective, its reflections upon worlding must, at least in part, remain fixed. In this way, I can state categorically that my stance toward eggs (or anything – or anyone – else, for that matter) will remain the same over time – even though, from a worlding standpoint no such assumption can be made.

If we look at this from a seemingly opposite perspective, all of us are likely to have had the experience of changing our view regarding something or someone. A trusted friend acts in a way that betrays my trust and brings the friendship to an end. I discover a new-found ability that alters the direction of my professional life. I watch a film that I initially thought to be a work of genius but which now seems superficial and pedestrian. If such obvious possibilities of uncertainty were all that this second principle sought to highlight, then it is hardly deserving of overmuch attention. Surprising and unexpected events come upon us all at some time or other during our lives. What must be recognised is that these experiences of uncertainty are expressed within the structural conditions of the worldview. These instances of uncertainty are as necessary to the maintenance of the worldview as are its points of invariance and fixedness over time.

The uncertainty being addressed in the second principle is at the level of worlding. It proposes that uncertainty remains a constant given in our experience of being. Paradoxically, uncertainty is a certainty of existence. In this sense the
uncertainty of worlding expresses its presence at the worldview level not only in the surprising events in our lives, but just as equally and forcefully in the expected and (seemingly) fixed meanings and circumstances of everyday existence. Uncertainty, therefore, as expressed by this second principle includes rather than stands in opposition to the certainties construed and demanded by the worldview. This existential uncertainty points us not only to questions that address the ‘uncertain certainties’ and the ‘certain uncertainties’ that may befall being at any time, but, far more significantly, toward concerns regarding what and how it is to be an uncertain being within the open-endedness of inter-relational existence.

From an obvious standpoint, the principle of uncertainty alerts us to the constant possibility of the unexpected. Less obviously, it urges us to treat ‘the expected’ as novel, full of previously unforeseen qualities and possibilities. This second perspective of uncertainty is rarely discussed or considered by existential psychotherapists, or psychotherapists in general, for that matter. In not doing so, they miss potentially critical insights.

For example, the principle of uncertainty suggests that the experience of boredom or of ‘being in rut’ is not directly due to the rigidity of habitual behaviour, but rather to the degree of uncertainty that is permitted to exist within that repeated behaviour. Television ‘lifestyle’ experts or newspaper agony aunts, for instance, forever suggest novel positions or activities as ways of ‘spicing up’ a couple’s moribund sexual life. In taking this stance, they fail to consider how it is that any number of other couples may be happily satisfied with, and require no ‘spicing up’ of, their sexual relations, even though what they do and when they do it might be characterised as being habitual and predictable. Equally, such pundits avoid alerting their audience to the awareness that even the novel position or activity may all too rapidly come to be experienced as boring and bland. What such examples make plain is that the experience of pleasurable excitement in one’s sexual relations, or the lack of it, has little to do with matters of novelty or habit, but rather reveals the consequences of an openness toward, or an avoidance of, uncertainty. In sum, worlding, in its uncertainty, is always surprising.

Perhaps most tellingly (at least for Western societies and culture), at the worldview level, ‘being an uncertain being’ challenges that most basic and central assumption concerning the self and its subjective know-ability. Uncertainty extends not just toward others or the world but also to each ‘I’ who both inhabits and questions the world. Just as I might be shaken and surprised by the unexpectedness and challenge of novel events, circumstances and behaviours that might contradict or require me to reshape my assumptions about how an other or others in general are and behave, so too might those self-same challenges arise from the appearance and behaviour of an ‘I’ who, in some ways, is not recognisable as ‘I’ and yet is. If I return to my earlier example of my dislike of eggs, I can see that changing my view of eggs (‘UHmm! I love eggs!’) alters not merely my relation to eggs, but also my relation to ‘me’. If I once defined my self as ‘I am Ernesto who hates eggs’, who am I now if ‘I am Ernesto who loves eggs’? And more, the
impact this re-definition of ‘Ernesto’ will have on ‘Ernesto’, and whether this impact will be limited or dramatically life-changing, cannot be known until it has occurred. This aspect of uncertainty brings a somewhat quixotic quality to the quest ‘to know my self’. While the attempt in such a quest may retain some, even substantial, value, the assumption of uncertainty makes it clear that it can never be more than incomplete.

Considered in a slightly different fashion, uncertainty opens our experience of being to a multitude of ‘points of departure’. That we may elect to go down or be forced to follow any number of such points is inevitable. At the same time, whatever the number or duration or quality of such departures, none of us will ever truly ‘arrive’ in any final and complete sense. Our life journeying may provoke a felt sense of a mistaken direction, or of having missed or been denied a critical junction. It may seem at times as though our directed point of arrival recedes ever further into the distance or appears so tantalisingly close that we can almost believe we are there. From an uncertain standpoint, we are always in some relation to the potential of arrival and yet never arrive.

In summarising Isiah’s Berlin’s analysis of value pluralism as discussed earlier in this section, John Gray cites a particularly revealing and relevant passage from Joshua Cherniss’s Introduction to Berlin’s text. Cherniss writes: ‘Man is incapable of self-completion, and therefore never wholly predictable; fallible, a complex combination of opposites, some reconcilable, others incapable of being resolved or harmonised; unable to cease from his search for truth, happiness, novelty, freedom, but with no guarantee . . . of being able to attain them’ (Cherniss, 2006, quoted in Gray, 2006: 21). This quote serves as a reasonable summary of the second principle of existential phenomenology.

And yet, if certainty is to be viewed only as a necessary fixture for the maintenance of the worldview, it remains to be asked: if the worldview is the structural attempt to reflect worlding, what leads it to deviate so far from, and discredit, the evidence of uncertainty? How does existential theory respond to this all too evident point? To provide at least an initial answer, we must turn to its third key underlying principle.

**The Third Principle: Existential Anxiety**

Freedom’s possibility announces itself in anxiety. Søren Kierkegaard

The third principle that I believe to be a necessary constituent of all existential psychotherapies follows on from the implications of the first two. It asks us to consider the human reflective reaction to inter-relationally derived uncertainty and proposes that our response is inevitably one of unease, discomfort or, most broadly, anxiety. But why should this, and only this, be the response? To begin to answer this question, we must first address a seemingly unrelated aspect of ‘being human’ – our ability to generate meaning out of our lived experiences of, and relations to and with, the world.
Meaning


Tao Te Ching

As far as we can know at present, our unique form of evolutionarily derived consciousness has as its primary function the construction of a meaningful reality, or, as I have suggested as the title to an earlier book, an interpreted world (Spinelli, 2005). Existential phenomenology argues that one of the essential distinguishing characteristics of being human is that we require meaning of, and impose meaning on to the world, just as it is through our relatedness to the world that we experience our selves as meaning-making beings. We interpret the world via the human process of construing meaning from those ‘things’ or events which impinge upon our experience and with which we are in relation. Consequently, we are disturbed by the lack or loss of meaning; we can go to great lengths to avoid or deny those instances and experiences that challenge our most deeply fixed, or sedimented, existing meanings – even to the extent of disowning, or dissociating from, those experiences that challenge that currently maintained meaning (Cohn, 2002; Spinelli, 2005; Strasser and Strasser, 1997).

All of the above points accompany the overall structuring of lived experience via the worldview. From a worlding perspective, however, whatever worldview-related meaning constructions emerge – be they concerned with my notions of self, others or the world in general – remain necessarily incomplete and in some ways distorted expressions of worlding. In this way, it can be seen that meaning is the worldview’s attempt to structure worlding.

As inadequate as these attempts may ultimately be, as several key existential theorists have highlighted, they continue to reveal that worlding-derived inter-relational foundation through which, at a worldview level, both ‘subject’ and ‘object’, or ‘self’ and ‘other’, are mutually and simultaneously made meaningful. Every instance of meaning does not only construct, or re-construct, the object of our focus. Just as significantly, the focusing ‘subject’ is also simultaneously constructed or re-constructed in and through the act (Ihde, 1986a; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Spinelli, 2005).

The third principle argues that although meaning emerges through the worldview in that it is the primary means with which to structure the experiential openness of worlding, it, nonetheless, remains rooted in relatedness and, hence, is subject to the constant possibility of being de-structured. That is to say, all meanings are open to the threat of becoming meaningless.

This emphasis upon the inevitable openness of meaning can be expressed in terms of the ultimate meaninglessness of meaning. If the qualities, features and conditions of meaning cannot be fully ‘captured’, and instead remain inevitably open to novel interpretative possibilities then, in this sense of an ever-elusive finality, they are meaningless.

As an important instance of this conclusion, Heidegger made explicit the impossibility of deriving in any objective fashion that which modernist science has
called ‘truth’. This notion of truth depends upon both the possibility and actuality of ‘capturing’ meaning in such a way that it is no longer open to novel and alternative possibilities. If I have discerned the truth to my existence, or to any aspect of it, then its meaning is bound, its interpretation is final and fixed forever, and cannot be subject to alternative interpretative meanings. Instead, for Heidegger, the origin of our idea of truth reaches back to the notion of aletheia – the ever-disclosing, ever-revealing, openness to being. From this standpoint, my meaning may be ‘truthful’ in that it both reveals that which is there for me and, at the same time, opens that meaning which is there for me to further possibilities of meaning-extending (or disclosing) truthfulness. Truth, in this sense, is never complete or completed. The implications of this view, not least for psychotherapeutic practice, are extensive and significant. They imply, as the relational psychotherapist Leslie Farber proposed, that ‘speaking truthfully is a more fitting ambition than speaking the truth’ (Farber, 2000:10).

At the same time, engaging in the enterprise of truthfulness requires the perpetual ‘holding’ of complementary stances toward, on the one hand, the worldview’s attempt to construct a certain and ‘captured’ reality whose meaning is fixed and final, and, on the other, the lived experience of worlding that points us to the uncertainty and openness of meaning. This ever-present tension, be it presented in terms such as ‘meaning/meaninglessness’ or ‘certainty/uncertainty’, expresses itself experientially as anxiety.

Existential anxiety

Now is the age of anxiety. W.H. Auden

Existential anxiety is perhaps best understood if considered from two distinct, if inter-related, perspectives.

From an initial perspective, existential anxiety refers to the inevitable unease and insecurity that accompanies the worldview’s partial and limiting attempts to reflect inter-relational uncertainty from a meaning-based perspective. In this sense, existential anxiety necessarily permeates all reflective experiences of relatedness. As such, it is neither avoidable, nor is it an aspect of pathology, but rather a basic ‘given’ of human existence as reflected from the structural standpoint of the worldview. Considered in this way, the dilemma of existential anxiety is not so much that it is, but rather how each of us ‘lives with’ it.

This shift in focus draws out the second understanding to be derived from existential anxiety. In this second sense, existential anxiety can be seen to be the source point or instigator of all attempts to embrace, to deny, or claims to have resolved, the uncertainties of an existence grounded in relatedness. Viewed in this way, existential anxiety encompasses all responses to the conditions of existence. Thus, it need not be the case that anxiety is experienced as solely or necessarily a debilitating, disruptive or problematic presence that must be reduced or removed. While anxiety may, and often does, provoke feelings of despair, confusion and bewilderment, it is equally the case that the experience of anxiety can
also be stimulating, can re-awaken or enhance our connectedness to being alive, and arouses creativity — but only so long as such experiences permit the reshaping and reconstructing of a novel meaning that can be accepted and ‘owned’. When no novel meaning arises, or alternatively, when the only possible meaning to present itself seems too perilous and destabilising to accept, then anxiety is experienced as destructive and as a threat to one’s very existence. While it might make sense to seek to avoid such expressions of anxiety, the third principle forces us to recognise that a life that was anxiety-free would also be bereft of wonder, enthusiasm and excitement.

On further consideration, this second perspective also alerts us to the disturbing realisation that whatever the stance adopted, anxiety cannot be removed from our reflections upon our experience of existence. If I embrace anxiety, anxiety remains. Equally, my attempts to deny it provoke further expressions of anxiety. In this way, it can be seen that just as existential anxiety is the ‘cause’ of our attempts to respond at a reflective level to the uncertainties of an existence grounded in relatedness, it is also the ‘effect’ that emerges from those attempts.

As was discussed above, at the worldview level the ‘given’ of uncertainty provokes the experience of anxiety. As was the case with uncertainty, for the worldview to accept the full anxiety of worlding is to threaten the very maintenance of the worldview structure. The worldview’s elevation of fixed meanings, truths, and certainties would seem to permit some escape from existential anxiety. At the same time, because the worldview remains an attempt to reflect worlding, existential anxiety continues to express itself as an agent or entity within the worldview structure. In this way, existential anxiety becomes ‘essentialised’ or structured in a ‘thing-‘ or ‘construct-like’ manner and can be ‘identified’ as a symptom or a disorder in thought, affect and/or behaviour.

As will be discussed in Part Two, it is of particular concern to existential psychotherapy to focus upon these latter, structural derivations of anxiety. These typically express themselves in rigid and restrictive patterns of thought and behaviour that serve as attempts to avoid that which is perceived to be unknown and novel. Conversely, they may appear as determined demands and quests for the unknown and novel. What both these rigid and inflexible stances reveal in general are symptoms of unease, commonly expressed in terms such as obsessive or compulsive behaviours, phobias and addictive disorders.

In our attempts to avoid or diminish the disturbing aspects of anxiety, we seek out and assert fixed truths, facts and statements, and deny or dissociate from those instances in our experience that cast doubt or challenge our assertions of certainty and fixed meaning. This denial has been referred to as inauthenticity (Heidegger, 1962) or bad faith (Sartre, 1991) and its frequency and appeal lies precisely in that it serves to allay the unease and uncertainty of being-in-the-world (Cohn, 1997; Spinelli, 2005; Yalom, 1980). As Heidegger writes, ‘Anxiety throws Dasein [i.e. the relational human being] back upon that which it is most anxious about – its authentic potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world’ (Heidegger, 1962: 232).
The principle of existential anxiety points us toward the awareness that maintaining a truthful stance toward our existence is no simple or easy matter. At the same time, it is not only the sages and intellectuals who become aware of, and seek to grasp and communicate, our relationship with anxiety. The existential notion of death anxiety, for instance, requires no intermediary or meta-theoretical explanatory prompt for anyone to be aware of, and experience, his or her relatedness to it. All human beings become directly aware of the temporal nature of their life and its inevitable 'movement toward death'. At the same time, they also know that the conditions for death's occurrence (such as when and how it will occur, or what will kill us) remain uncertain and unpredictable. While culture and religious beliefs and broadly general or shared factors undoubtedly influence how each of us responds to the certainty of death, it is also evident that any specific response to the anxiety accompanying this awareness expresses itself through stances and attitudes that permeate all aspects of our worldview’s structural attempts to reflect the experience of worlding. For example, the conviction that science is just one step away from discovering the secret of immortality or, equally, the certainty that I will continue to exist in some disembodied fashion can be seen as responses that seek to avoid the anxiety accompanying the ‘realization that life is inevitably moving toward death’ (Cohn, 1997: 70). But it is also evident that in order to maintain these convictions I am likely to be bound to the expression (or avoidance of expression) of certain behaviours or to the espousal (or repudiation) of particular views and attitudes that will, in turn, structure my overall stance toward existence. The consequences of these strategies were best summarised by the existential psychotherapist, Medard Boss, who wrote that ‘people who are most afraid of death are those who have the greatest anxiety about life’ (Boss, 1994: 112).

In brief, the third principle of existential phenomenology expresses the view that anxiety is an inevitable universal expression, or ‘given’, of human existence that pervades every expression of existence. At a worldview level, anxiety expresses itself through our ways of being with self, others and the world as a whole. At the same time, however, the third principle also acknowledges that those ‘untruthful’ responses to existential anxiety which seek to avoid or deny the experiential consequences of relatedness and uncertainty, will serve to ‘fix’ and focus existential anxiety so that it expresses itself through the ‘structures’ of symptoms and disorders.

The Three Principles: A Summary

Our life is the instrument we use to experiment with the truth. Eliot Pattison

It is my view that the three underlying principles discussed above – relatedness, uncertainty and existential anxiety – are necessary to any explication of existential-phenomenological theory. That they may be sufficient as well as necessary remains debatable. My own view is that these three conditions are sufficient in so far as they provide the most basic ‘sketch’ or ‘ground-plan’ of the terrain. At the same
time, however, it is also my view that this sketch contains within it the necessary clues with which to tease out for further elaboration the specific 'points of departure' associated with the particular views and contributions of the various branches of existential phenomenology as represented by its foundational philosophical contributors – Edmund Husserl (1931a, 1931b, 1965), Martin Heidegger (1962, 1976, 2001) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1973, 1985, 1991). This is not to suggest that the contributions of these three philosophers, much less those of pivotal thinkers such as Martin Buber (1970, 2002), George Gadamer (2004), Karl Jaspers (1963), Immanuel Levinas (1987, 1999) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964a, 1964b), among numerous others, can simply be reduced to these three principles. Nor is it being suggested that anyone claiming to espouse existential phenomenology is no longer required to grapple intellectually with many, if not all, of these philosophers (and any number of others left unmentioned).

What is being proposed is that any claim to the elucidation of, or affiliation to, a form of, or schema for, existential phenomenology must be able to address these three underlying principles as pivotal constituents of its approach and argument.

In particular, when considering these three principles from a predominantly psychotherapeutic, rather than philosophical, perspective, this text will seek to demonstrate how the principles of relatedness, uncertainty and existential anxiety not only provide the basis for the practice of existential psychotherapy, but, equally, emerge as the primary means for its definition, and contrast to, or comparison with, other systems of psychotherapy. Just as Part One of this text seeks to provide an overview of these principles considered from the standpoint of existential psychotherapy, Part Two will propose a specific structural possibility for the practice of existential psychotherapy that is both derived from the three principles and that expresses them.

Before moving to these areas, however, some further consideration of a number of corollaries arising from the three principles particularly pertinent to existential psychotherapy in practice is now required.