

Existential Anxiety and Existential Joy

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Introduction

This paper examines the possibility that existential joy can be an affect of ontological significance that can transcend so called 'existential anxiety'. I will first discuss these terms and then argue that such a transition requires a particular frame of mind, which will be analysed in relation to some features of the human condition usually associated with existential anxiety.

Existential Anxiety

Since Kierkegaard, almost all existentialists have addressed the subject of anxiety and made a significant contribution to its understanding. Nevertheless, their observations and conclusions sometimes differ significantly, so a certain ambiguity still surrounds the term. In an attempt to make it clearer, it may be useful, as a starting point, to make a distinction between anxiety and fear. Although these two sensations are sometimes identified, there is evidence that they differ even on the level of physiological reactions, such as gastrointestinal activities (see May, 1950, p.197). Trying to explain this difference, May connects anxiety with a threat to the basic, fundamental values of an individual, and fear with a threat to more peripheral values. However, this distinction does not seem satisfactory because one can feel anxiety and fear in connection with the same matter. What makes a difference is not the values involved, but an element of uncertainty (in the case of anxiety) and an actual danger (in the case of fear). While fear has a clear object (an imminent threat), anxiety does not, it is linked to uncertainty, which often provokes insecurity. Goldstein writes that 'in contrast to fear, which is always fear of something, anxiety is 'essentially' without object and attacks us from the rear, as it were.' (in Spiegelberg, 1972, p.313). 'Essentially' seems to suggest that for anxiety to arise the inner state of insecurity is more important than an external object. As May himself notices, 'in anxiety it is this security pattern itself which is threatened.' (*op. cit.* p.181)

Unlike ordinary anxiety that may be triggered by specific events (such as a possibility of losing one's job), *existential* anxiety refers to uncertainties relating to the human condition, existence itself, of which some features will be discussed below.

Anxiety And The Development Of Consciousness

Anxiety is what you feel when you think too much.
A Yugoslav Farmer

The link between anxiety and uncertainty is important because the realisation of uncertainty is impossible without self-awareness. This is why animals, as Lidell's experiments showed, do not have anxiety (see May, 1950, p.85). In fact, it seems that anxiety is a 'side-effect' of the development of consciousness. It is not surprising then that 'personalities of higher intelligence, originality, and level of differentiation likewise have more anxiety.' (*ibid.*, p.351) If this is the case, anxiety is *not* necessarily 'a signal that something is wrong in one's personality and one's human relationships' (*ibid.*, p.300). It could be, and very often it is, as Deurzen-Smith asserts, 'a more general and basic experience which accompanies any increase in existential awareness.' (1988, p.145)

A number of authors (Fromm, 1942; Buber, 1947; May, 1950) have recognised the link between anxiety and human development. Kierkegaard suggests that the myth of Adam symbolically represents the moment of gaining self-consciousness (significantly, he also maintains that the myth is re-enacted in every individual somewhere between the ages of one and three). Before that point the being is in a direct contact with the world, bound by instincts and therefore free of anxiety. Becoming self-conscious brings a sense of greater freedom, but also an awareness of the separation between subject and object. This leads to a recognition of uncertainty, and consequently, insecurity and anxiety. The first moment of realising that one is separated from the rest of the world must be an extremely anxiety provoking experience (which possibly inspired, to follow the above analogy, the myth of the expulsion from the garden of Eden, and may well be responsible for the phenomenon known to all parents as 'the terrible twos'). That loss of security is compensated at the collective level by structuring reality, in other words, by creating (or being initiated into) the culture (a language, religion, moral codes, taboos, customs, etc.). According to Buber, 'being able to have confidence within community compensates for cosmic insecurity' (1937, p.196)

However, although a social structure may, at least temporarily, provide a sense of security, it limits freedom and often leads to 'bad faith' - an inauthentic life. Yet, going beyond socially accepted norms and views can bring insecurity, loneliness, responsibility and

consequently anxiety. Thinking about the Renaissance (but I believe applicable to our time too) Fromm writes:

It seems that the new freedom brought two things to them: an increased feeling of strength and at the same time an increased isolation, doubt, scepticism, and - resulting from all these - anxiety. (1942, p.16)

This all indicates that anxiety appears when an individual faces reality without the protection of personal or social constructs, and is confronted once again with its inherent uncertainty. From this perspective, existential anxiety is a fundamental, ontological experience, resulting from the recognition of the inherent uncertainty of the human condition. If this is the case, anxiety can be indeed considered an 'indicative of the level of awareness in a person' (Deurzen-Smith, 1988, p.39), and unavoidable on that level. The question is, however, whether it indicates the final stage of development. In other words, are we condemned to either endure a permanent state of anxiety or fall back into 'bad faith', pretending that reality is nothing more than our constructs? I will argue that this state can be transcended, in which case existential anxiety can be superseded with another ontological feeling that can be called 'existential joy'. This possibility could have important implications not only for individual development, but also for counselling practice and education.

Existential Joy

On the lay a cock and hen pheasant symbolise that unity of 'positive' and 'negative' in a completed whole which still so infuriatingly eludes me. But instead of complaining I should be thankful that I have caught a glimpse of it all.

Custance, a former manic-depressive patient¹

Applying the terminology of a dialectic may help in clarifying the level of awareness related to existential joy. The first stage, characterised by an instinctual, unconscious unity between the subject and object, being and the world, can be called *the thesis*. The second stage, characterised by self-consciousness and the separation between the subject and object would be *the antithesis* and is marked by existential anxiety. This allows for the third stage, *the synthesis*, characterised by the regained union, but this time with full awareness. It does not mean going back, but finishing the cycle. In this case, anxiety can be seen as a force that actually pushes towards that synthesis. Some authors, as Mowrer, recognise that:

... Anxiety represents not only an attempted return of the repressed but also a striving on the part of the total personality toward a re-establishment of unity, harmony, oneness, 'health'. (in May, 1950, p.107)

However, little is said about what happens if one manages to reach that stage, and whether anxiety is in this case still 'valid' or it can be transcended. It seems that the majority of existentialists have not considered the possibility of moving beyond anxiety, although an embryo of that idea can be found a number of their texts. Some of them, though, implicitly (e.g. Heidegger) or explicitly acknowledge that joy could be an experience of ontological significance. Ricoeur (1965, p.161), for example, writes:

If being is that which beings are not, anxiety is the feeling par excellence of ontological difference. But joy attests that we have a part of us linked to this very lack of being in beings. That is why the spiritual joy, the intellectual love and the beatitude, spoken of by Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza and Bergson, designate, under different names and in different philosophical contexts, the only affective 'mood' worthy of being called ontological. Anxiety is only its underside of absence and distance.

It is postulated that the sense of joy (from a variety of sources such as reading a book, having sex, hearing a joke or gaining spiritual insights) is a result of experiences that have a unifying character. It involves a certain mental resolution (even in the case of humour), a synthesis of what has been subjectively perceived as separated, unrelated or even conflicting.² Existential joy relates to ordinary joy as existential anxiety relates to everyday anxiety. It is the result of the synthesis related to fundamental facets of the human condition, not specific events. While ordinary joy has a specific trigger, existential joy does not. It is probably better described as an undirected, underlying state. There is also another parallel. A person can experience existential anxiety, as it were, by chance. 'Limit-situations', to use Jaspers' term (e.g. an accident), that break the established structure of reality, can bring somebody to the point of experiencing existential anxiety. The same can happen with existential joy. Similar 'limited-situations' may bring an unusual sense of joy, characterised by the sense of unity with the world, before the person falls back into routine or succumb to difficulties. It may be objected that joy in this case emerges because of the prospect of recovery, for example, but, as some therapists claim,

² This is what makes the difference between joy and pleasure. Pleasure does not need to be related to a sense of harmony and produce joy, as any Catholic adolescent or dieter after a hearty meal knows.

¹ Podvoll, E. (1990) *The Seduction of Madness*. London: Random Century, p. 97.

even terminally ill people who have given up all hope of recovery are sometimes capable of experiencing it.³ However, this 'accidental' experiences are usually short-term.

A lasting sense of joy requires the frame of mind characterised by the synthesis or union of opposites. Deurzen-Smith states that 'clients can only be counselled from anxiety to authenticity if they take this universal principle of complementarity of opposites thoroughly into account.' (1988, p.67) This is not to say that anxiety can be avoided. On the contrary, only through detachment from 'bad faith', which inevitably leads to anxiety, can we establish authentic contact with reality. Kierkegaard rightly points out that 'only that man who has gone through the anxiety of possibility is educated to have no anxiety' (1844, p. 141). However, if that 'wasteland' can be crossed, if the subject and object can be united again without abandoning self-awareness, anxiety can be replaced with the sense of joy. This will be the sign that we have made a further step in our development.

Practical Application

In this section I will examine how the sense of unity and accompanying feeling of joy relates to those conditions that are usually linked to existential anxiety: uncertainty, nothingness, death, loneliness, meaning(lessness) and freedom.

Uncertainty

Man's security comes from within himself, and the security of all men is founded upon the security of the individual.
Manly Hall

Many authors have recognised the link between anxiety and uncertainty. In fact, anxiety can be seen as an affective expression of our awareness of uncertainty. Averill writes that 'the cognitive structures which a man creates are never completely secure; anxiety is one manifestation of their impending or actual collapse.' (1980, p.68) However, this does not mean that uncertainty is always negative. People often actively seek uncertainty (uncertainty of the outcome of a game, book, movie, date or adventure is usually desirable). A totally predictable life would be unbearably dull. I would argue that it is not the uncertainty, but the ensuing insecurity that provokes anxiety. Uncertainty and

³ Examples of this can be found in *Love Executioner* and *Momma and the Meaning of Life* by Irvin Yalom, and also in *Existential Counselling in Practice* by Emmy van Deurzen-Smith.

insecurity are not the same. Uncertainty is an objective characteristic of the world, while insecurity is a subjective feeling that characterises the way we relate to the world. It is true that uncertainty often causes insecurity, but this does not need to be so. It can be avoided if the fundamental uncertainty of life, the fact that anything may change, is fully accepted. Instead of trying to impose control from 'outside', this requires accepting the constant flux of reality and moving together with it (like a surfer who glides on waves instead of trying to control them). It is easy to recognise that such a mastery can bring a sense of joy. To achieve this, however, it is necessary to abandon an attempt to obtain security based on a misleading belief in certainty, but instead derive it from accepting uncertainty in its synthesis with predictable elements of life.

Nothingness

The mark of true emptiness is joy.
Jack Kornfield

Anxiety is probably most frequently related to the awareness of nothingness. In fact Kierkegaard, Tillich, May and some other existentialists define anxiety as the recognition of nothingness. Many clients in counselling practice sooner or later come to the point of recognising an 'emptiness' inside themselves, which usually causes considerable concern.

The problem here seems to arise again from sharply dividing the two sides, being and nothingness, and seeing them as antagonistic phenomena, opposed to each other. Yet, the reality is that they are both necessary and coexist as an inseparable unity. Nothingness could not have been even recognised without being, and being, existence itself, would have been motionless without nothingness. We can move only if there is nothing in front of us. By the same token, we can grow only if there is some emptiness within us. As Jaspers points out, 'transcendence is as much being as not being' (1967, p.225).

Some Eastern philosophies recognised the value of nothingness long time ago, but I will include a quote that refers to a more familiar scene:

Many people are afraid of Emptiness, however, because it reminds them of Loneliness. Everything has to be filled in, it seems - appointment books, hillsides, vacant lots - but when all the spaces are filled, the Loneliness really begins. Then the Groups are joined, the Classes are signed up for, and the Gift-to-Yourself item are bought. When the Loneliness starts creeping in the door, the Television Set is turned on to make it go away. But it does not go away. So some of us do instead, and after discarding the emptiness of the Big Congested Mess, we discover the fullness of Nothing. (Hoff, 1989, p.147-148)

This synthesis of nothingness and being, which involves accepting nothingness as a valuable and necessary part of

reality and ourselves, makes the anxiety related to it redundant and consequently produces a sense of joy.

Death

I can be fully alive only when I face up to the possibility of my death.

Emmy van Deurzen-Smith

It is not difficult to conclude that death and anxiety go hand in hand, but this relationship is more complex than it at first appears. There are at least four concerns in connection with death: *dying* (pain, sickness, helplessness etc.); *loss* (at least of everything that is a part of material world, including one's body); *unpredictability* (of the moment of death); *the unknown* (related to the death experience). I will not discuss the first two points, as they initiate fear, not anxiety. Only the last two are connected with uncertainty and therefore can potentially cause anxiety.

The concern that we are all sentenced to death without knowing the day of the execution can justifiably be a source of great anxiety. To deal with this issue, it is necessary to introduce another feature of the frame of mind that leads to existential joy – the ability to be 'here and now'. This does not mean (as some existentialists conclude) being irresolute or denying the past and the future. On the contrary, this means focusing all life in the present moment. How does it relate to death? In reality the past no longer exists, and the future has not yet arrived. I do not exist, *I am existing*. Because I am now, I cannot be dead now. I can die at the very next instant, but not now, which is the only reality. Therefore, although I am fully aware that I am going to die, by living in the present I can avoid the concern about that moment.

Death as an unknown relates to the fact that we may experience the death of others and extrapolate that we will also die, but we cannot reflect on our own personal experience. We do not know what it means to die, how does it feel if it feels at all (and, of course, if there is any experience after that). Karl Jaspers writes that 'death is something inconceivable, something really unthinkable. What we imagine and think about it are only negations and secondary phenomena, never anything positive' (1967, p.26). But, are we really completely inexperienced about death? If we accept the existentialist notion that 'the person is a constant process of becoming' does it not mean that the person is a constant process of dying, as well? Of course, the 'real' death, the moment when one's body stops functioning, is something unique, but I would agree with Yalom that 'life and death are not independent; they exist simultaneously, not consecutively' (1980, p.29). This means that our body and our consciousness are familiar with death as something inseparable from life, which can give us confidence to accept whatever, if anything, may arise. Again, the important thing is to encompass both, life and death, as a unity. Buber writes:

... man as existence, as comprehension of being that looks toward death, cannot be separated from man as a creature that begins to die when it begins to live, and that cannot possess life without death, or preserving power without destructive and disintegrate power. (1937, p.164)

Moreover, the acceptance of death puts in perspective possessiveness, attachment and importance, and enables us to perceive life in its totality. Macquarrie, describing Heidegger's view, writes:

Death is not merely a negative phenomenon. To anticipate death with resoluteness is to find certain wholeness in it. It sets a boundary to my existence and so makes possible a unity of existence. (1972, p.218)

In fact, including death into one's life concept, far from provoking anxiety, can become a way of overcoming it. Anxiety is linked to uncertainty, and the only certainty in life is that we will die. Therefore, this can provide a firm starting point in conceptualising existence. Some empirical observations (see Yalom, 1980; Boss, 1971) indeed suggest that awareness of death makes us respect life more and value every moment – paradoxically it makes us more alive. So it is not a paradox to claim that encompassing life and death as a unity can contribute to transcending anxiety and experiencing existential joy.

Separateness

The process of growth is process of separation.

Otto Rank

Existential anxiety is most often experienced when we are separated from others. When we are alone, our relatively fragile constructs of reality do not have a support, which may cause insecurity. On the other hand, although our constructs may provide us with an illusion of certainty, they are, at the same time, barriers between the world and us. Yalom writes:

One is isolated not only from other beings but, to the extent that one constitutes one's world, from world as well. (1980, p.10)

Existentialists maintain that solitude is necessary because society is inauthentic. Macquarrie sums their view up well:

Practically all existentialists, even those who lay most stress on the notions of 'I and Thou' and being-with-others, are agreed that human social relations, as we normally find them, are sadly distorted. The everyday being-with others is inauthentic; that is to say, it does not really involve the selves of those who take part in it, it does not flow from whole selves... What we find is a distorting and distorted relationship, and it is out of the experience of this that we are to understand the existentialist critique of society and the summons to the individual to come out from the crowd and take the burden of his being upon himself... (1972, p.118)

From this perspective, accepting separateness seems necessary not only for developing and maintaining our individuality but also for achieving an authentic contact with the world. Describing the experience of a manic-depressive client, Podvoll (1990, p.93) writes:

Only in depression could he feel, to the bone, his utter aloneness in the universe... For Custance, this experience was an island of clarity and the herald of his recovery.

On this basis, some of existentialists hold that an authentic relationship is practically impossible (Sartre, for example, in his play *In Camera*, writes 'Hell is...other people!'). However, this seems too pessimistic. I am more inclined to agree with those existentialists (such as Buber and Tillich) who believe that the 'individual break with inauthentic society is the first step towards being free for genuine relations with others.' (Macquarrie, 1972, p.122)

If we are no longer driven in our relationships with others by fear of loneliness and act from 'the whole being', we may be able to move beyond individual isolation. This would require the synthesis of separateness and belonging, which can replace the sense of isolation with detachment, and possessiveness with true emotions. Binswanger characterises love not only as being-in-the-world, but as being-beyond-the-world. It takes us beyond the world of one's own self to the world of we-hood (Spiegelberg, 1972, p.225). No doubt that such authentic moments of intimacy can be a source of a great joy. However, such an attitude needs not to be limited to another individual, but can be expanded to the world in general. As Yalom suggests, love can become 'a way of being, a 'giving to', not a 'falling for'; a mode of relating at large, not an act limited to a single person' (1980, p.11).

Meaning(lessness)

He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.
Friedrich Nietzsche

Many existentialists (although by all means not all of them) concur with the view that life is essentially meaningless. A leading existential therapist (Spinelli), for example, writes:

Viewed from a wide variety of perspectives one could rightly conclude that life itself is a pointless enterprise. (2001, p.9)

On the other hand, a number of existential psychologists point out that humans require meaning to survive (see, for example, Frankl, 1970, 1978; Yalom, 1980). One can easily feel lost in a meaningless world which can be a great source of anxiety. The most frequent reason given for suicide is that the person has no purpose for which to continue living (Farber, 1968). So, even if we agree with Spinelli's overconfident claim that there is no meaning of life, creating meaning *in* one's life needs to be considered.

Klinger (1977) writes that when people describe their lives as meaningful, they usually mean that they are committed to, and pursuing with some reasonable success, valued goals or incentives. However, not all goals and incentives are conducive to a stable sense of meaning. I suggest that meaning in life has three 'spatial' dimensions (width, length and depth) and one temporal dimension. It is argued that expanding the space dimensions and focusing on the time dimension contributes to minimizing anxiety and to an emergence of existential joy.

The width of meaning refers to the locus of concern. Individuals concerned only with themselves have a vulnerable and finite locus, so they are open to anxiety. Devotion to others (e.g. to one's family, charity work, teaching, nursing, etc.) has a wider scope and is more stable, because even one's own death cannot diminish its meaningfulness. The universal as a locus is infinite and therefore gives lasting meaning (of course, it does not need to exclude the first two, but can include them as a part of a wider perspective). The universal can be conceptualised within various frameworks (spirituality, nature, humankind, philosophical ideas, etc.). What is important is awareness that an individual is a part of a larger picture and a willingness to harmonise one's life and actions with it. In the words of Victor Frankl, meaning in life is found if one asks what life expects from him, not what he expects from life.

The depth of meaning

The philosopher Bradley points out that humans have a need for coherence: 'if pleasures and achievements do not have any meaningful relation to one another, they will not give any satisfying overall character to one's life' (in Norman, 1983, p.165). This implies that the sense that one's life is meaningful may be lost if one is bound only to short-term, day-to-day goals and achievements. Overall aims, visions, deep affects, ideals (not as something above, but as a part of oneself) can provide inspiration and make a value of everyday life, rather than allowing it to be reduced to a succession of dreary experiences.

The length of meaning

A commitment to finite activities or destinations provides temporary meaning. For example, if one is committed to a sporting achievement, bringing up children, or a job, life may become meaningless when a physical peak is reached, children leave, or one retires. However, some activities have no such limits (e.g. pursuing knowledge) and therefore, can provide lasting meaning.

The temporal dimension

The realisation of goals can cause anxiety because there is always some uncertainty involved with even the smallest aim. After all, our own death can interrupt us at any moment. This source of anxiety can be overcome by focusing on the process rather than an aim, emphasising

the quality of action instead of the final result. An aim is still necessary to provide a direction, but that is all. Concentrating on the present, doing our best 'here and now', can not only reduce anxiety, but can also increase self-confidence because the process depends on us, while the end result may depend to a great extent on circumstances.

The above should indicate that it is possible to create a stable sense of meaning in one's life. Since most psychologists agree that 'feeling that one's life has some meaning and purpose is associated with happiness' (Argyle, 1987, p.215), we can conclude that in that case existential joy could replace anxiety associated with an apparent lack of meaning.⁴

Freedom and choice

God, give me the serenity
To accept what cannot be changed
The courage to change what can be changed
And the wisdom to know the difference.
The Serenity Prayer

Kierkegaard's well known definition, 'anxiety is the state of the human being, when he confronts his freedom' draws attention to the connection between anxiety and freedom. It seems that all existentialists agree on this point. Freedom can trigger anxiety because it always involves some uncertainty, which often causes insecurity. There is an inherent paradox between choice and its realisation: we are free to choose, but making a choice inevitably leads to renouncing choice - for every *yes* there must be a *no*, each decision eliminating other options. Sloan, paraphrasing Ricoeur, writes that 'there is often a sense of sacrifice or loss which accompanies choice, however great the exhilaration of forward movement' (1986, p.53) We simply can never know with certainty if we are making a right decision. A possibility of a wrong choice brings a burden of responsibility and sometimes feelings of anxiety and guilt, which can paralyse decision-making. Deurzen-Smith is right in saying:

The moment one becomes capable of living authentically one needs to find new criteria for deciding on right and wrong. While the old rules have become outdated with the rejection of external authority, one's inner authority requires a compass to travel by if it is to stay on the right track. (1988, p.56).

This is why one of the most important factors in overcoming existential anxiety is the recognition of *necessity* and its synthesis with freedom: 'I can be free only when I know what is necessary' says the same author

⁴ It may be noticed that this section does not refer to synthesis as other sections do. Synthesis is relevant for the issue of meaning too, but discussing this point would require examining the notion of *meaning of life*, which is well beyond the scope of this paper.

(Deurzen-Smith 1990, p.154). But what does necessity really mean in this context? Accepting what is necessary is more than just realizing general and individual limitations. I propose that it primarily means synchronising one's freedom with oneself and with reality. This is not to suggest giving up freedom and following one's own instincts, which would be a step backwards, but acknowledging oneself as one is and also reality as it is. I will discuss these two points further.

The necessity refers first of all to the necessity within us. In other words, the essence may not be before existence, but the existence is not before essence either. The essence and the existence of the human being emerge together and they should not oppose each other, but be allowed to work in conjunction. This means that the synthesis here refers to the relation between the two basic modalities of the person: *being* and *agency*, that can modify but should not oppose each other. In other words, my freedom *to be* (a particular person) can impose some limits to my freedom *to do* (certain things).

In reference to reality, the necessity means recognising that we are situated within a larger framework. To quote again Deurzen-Smith, 'orientating oneself by one's conscience always requires the ability to situate one's perspective within the wider framework of universal guidelines'. (1988, p.57) This does not mean either submissiveness or giving up freedom, but rather the cooperation of equal partners, as Buber states:

...destiny confronts him as the counterpart of his freedom. It is not his boundary, but his fulfilment; freedom and destiny are linked together in meaning. (1937, p.53)

I would like to make clear that I do not suggest that these 'universal guidelines' can be found in social constructs such as the ten commandments, the categorical imperative or 'laws of nature'. As fish could never define water, humans can only come up with an approximation, but never fully express in language these universal guidelines. So, this synthesis is not about following rigidly some rules (which can only kill joy, rather than foster it). It means developing an inner sense that recognises and takes into account the life course and its flow. This is not to say that cognitive, affective and perceptive capacities should not play a role, only that they should be treated as scaffoldings that assist a decision-making process, rather than something that constitute that process. What that requires is to be an authentic person and to cleanse oneself resolutely of habitual (or habituated) responses.

The synthesis between freedom and necessity understood in this way can provide a sense of security without restricting the person, so freedom, instead of causing anxiety can become a source of joy. This is already recognised by some existentialists:

Essential norms, if obeyed, fulfil and give the joy of fulfilment because they represent our own essential being against our existential distortion. (Tillich, 1952, p.14)

The following case example is an attempt to further clarify these ideas.

A case example

Although most clients come to counselling (at least initially) to deal with immediate problems rather than existential issues, the above perspective can be utilised in a variety of cases, even without a reference to the theoretical framework (the example below is such a case).

Providing case studies that would encompass all the issues discussed would itself require a whole paper. So, I have restricted myself to one example that relates to the issue of choice, mostly because that subject is perhaps more in need of an example than others.

A female client is confronted with the choice between two important men in her life. That choice would affect every aspect of her life, so she came to the session in a state of confusion, irresoluteness and anxiety. In her own words, she was just going in circles, and it is 'killing her'. My intervention consisted of the following steps: I first asked her to provide the reasons why she wants to be with one person, and also why she wants to be with the other, without drawing any conclusions. Then I asked her to express her emotions about one person and the other (again without drawing any conclusions). Finally I asked her to describe her perception, and perceptions of other people, whose opinions she values, of both men (without drawing any conclusions). Then I asked her to relax and sit back in silence. A few moments later she sprang to his feet, smiled and said, 'I know what to do', and soon after left. I do not know if she made the right decision (she did not even tell me what she decided, although I became aware of it in the following sessions). What I recognised though, was that she radiated confidence and even joy, a remarkable change to her state before this process.

The synthesis in this (somewhat simplified) case does not only refer to an attempted synthesis of the client's faculties (reason, affect and perception), but more importantly the synthesis of the basic human modalities mentioned above: existence and agency, what she is (which may include the existing values that do not need necessarily to be spelled out) and what she wants. It is important to notice that the interventions are intended to allow a tacit, intuitive element to play a role too, which enables that fusion to happen spontaneously.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that at a particular stage in the development of consciousness (characterised by

separation, individualisation and independence) people tend to perceive reality in dichotomies, some of which are analysed above. Many existentialist philosophers have considered this stage as a step further in comparison with a heteronymous mind, but they also recognised that that it has some undesirable consequences such as the underlying feeling of existential anxiety, which can have profound implications on an individual sense of well-being. In this paper, however, it is suggested that existential anxiety can be transcended and replaced with a sense of existential joy. This requires having a frame of mind that is characterised by the synthesis of opposites (such as predictability and uncertainty, being and nothingness, life and death, individuality and belonging, etc.). This is not to say that this frame of mind makes life a bed of roses. A person with such an attitude will still at times experience unpleasant feelings or be unhappy, but if she does not allow herself to be thrown back in the world of opposites, the underlying feeling of joy can be maintained, which would give her the capacity to face whatever comes without anxiety.

No doubt there are still a number of issues that can be raised. For example, what are possible obstacles on the journey from anxiety to joy? (Heidegger mentions the important one - boredom.) Can we maintain joy in extreme situation, when we experience, say, great pain? What happens if a person who has reached this stage is submerged in an inauthentic environment? My intention, was not, however, to try to answer all the questions related to this subject. To clarify the main purpose of introducing the notion of existential joy, I will finish the paper with the quote by the author which work I have referred to at the beginning:

A person is subjectively prepared to confront unavoidable anxiety constructively when he is convinced (consciously or unconsciously) that the values to be gained in moving ahead are greater than those to be gained by escape. (May, 1950, p.343)

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