Depression and Human Existence

Benedek

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Edited by

E. James Anthony, M.D.
Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis

Therese Benedek, M.D.
The Institute for Psychoanalysis, Chicago

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To Our Children and Grandchildren

Preface

Depression as a phenomenon of human life is capable of various interpretations. The contributing authors have grappled with its protean manifestations and have responded to it as an affect, a feeling, a mood, a reaction, an illness, and a psychosis. They have attempted to describe it, to classify it, to study its origins, and to follow its course. As the editors, we are not concerned with minimizing the differences, homogenizing the constructs, or drawing facile conclusions based on superficial resemblances. We do point out, nevertheless, that the psychoanalytic contributions are more noteworthy for their commonality than for their divergences. A multiauthor book of this nature can be compared to the elephant in the parable of the blind men: each takes hold of a different segment of reality and interprets it logically in terms of his experience and, by doing so, helps to bring to this book a sense of the universal.

With these ideas in mind, we had two main aims in assembling this book. The first was to build bridges between neighboring disciplines so that the different workers could reach out and extract new sustenance for further growth, demonstrating that areas such as the biological and the psychological are not cut off from each other. The second aim was in the nature of an experiment. The hypothesis we hoped to test was whether depression could be regarded as a manifestation of existential factors in human life. Would a multiauthor book, its parts constructed independently, offer any support for such an assumption? Each contributor was invited to produce a chapter dealing with his particular field of interest and was given no guidance as to any centralizing or amalgamating idea. To what extent this hypothesis was confirmed is considered in the Epilogue. The test

is a stringent one, since the chapters range from genetics to metapsychology, with offerings from neurochemistry, sociology, cultural anthropology, and developmental and clinical psychoanalysis.

A book that is conceived and produced in this manner is very much in keeping with the current trend of psychiatry, which is struggling toward a clarification of a sociopsychobiological model. With an emphasis on the historical heritage, the book traces the gradual evolution of many of our current ideas. It makes its appearance at a point in history when psychoanalysis and the basic theories of modern science are meeting at a crossroad. Approaching the same junction are psychoanalysis as a science of the individual's psychological development and psychoanalysis as a tool for investigation of a psychiatric condition (not necessarily an illness) as it evolves from infancy to old age. Each phase of this evolution represents a complex interaction between the individual (his psyche and soma), his immediate milieu (the family), and the ambient sociocultural conditions. This necessarily complicates the view of depression as a simple phenomenon affecting the individual because of some manifest precipitating cause.

Because of the complexity of this model, the psychiatrist of today is expected to include in his investigating equipment a detailed knowledge of the genetic structure of the family, the developmental history of the patient, the moral, social, and cultural requirements under which he is trained to take his place in society, his physical functioning, and the impact of all these on his emotional state in health and illness. This multifactor approach is fast becoming the approach preferred by the contemporary psychiatric patient, at least in the Western world.

We are well aware that so-called psychiatric humanism is on the fringe of medicine as a natural science and is even rejected by many physicians as basically nonmedical. Yet, psychoanalysis is considered a science rooted in biology, no matter how speculative the connection may appear. It is psychoanalysis that can help to encompass the diverse attempts at understanding the problem of depression, and it is psychoanalysis that throws light on the extent and difficulty of the problem. Genetics can only vaguely touch upon it, and neurophysiology and pharmacology can only struggle to disentangle the nerve pathways, the chemical mediation, and the functioning of the brain during normal and abnormal affective states. However, the "mysterious leap" between brain and mind, as Felix Deutsch termed it, remains as elusive as ever.

The juxtaposition of the approaches of various disciplines helps to highlight what is known, what is not known, and what is becom-

ing known. All the disciplines are in various states of half-knowledge, and definitive statements are not easy to make. There are, nevertheless, a common theme and a common task to illuminate some portion of the theme, and the effort in any one discipline can only be helpful to the rest. As time progresses, the work will, we hope, become mutually complementary.

The book is written by psychiatrists and psychoanalysts for psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and those in related disciplines. Behavioral scientists of all denominations are getting increasingly involved in the investigation of problems that afflict people in all societies and in all classes of life. Teachers are often perplexed by the chronically sad child in the classroom, pastoral counselors by the despair of some of their parishioners, and social workers by the profound feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that seize so many families as they become increasingly defeated by circumstances.

A multiauthor book such as this has one more feature: there are many contributors to thank for their collaboration in presenting their knowledge in the context of the book as a whole. Each of them has interpreted the editorial intention in his own way, and we are grateful for the expert knowledge that all of them have presented.

We also wish to record our personal debt to psychoanalysis for broadening our psychobiological horizons and for providing us with a frame of reference with which to incorporate knowledge from many different sources. If we look at things through psychoanalytic eyes, it is because our whole training and experience have been touched by this major influence in our lives.

Finally, we must acknowledge the work, less visible in the book itself but very visible in the manuscript, of our helpers, Carol Cordes and Darcy Gilpin, who typed and retyped the pages, constructed and reconstructed the table of contents, corresponded with contributing authors and our publisher, and, finally, helped in the arduous task of proofreading. Martha Kniepkamp, in St. Louis, had the additional task of preparing the final version for the publisher. She made herself quite indispensable to this task. P. G. Gordon's expertise in editing and preparing the manuscript and her helpfulness in communications between the editors and publisher deserve our gratitude. From our publisher we have received nothing but help, encouragement, and advice when these were needed. They were there at the beginning when the book was assessed, during the difficult middle phase when contributors appeared to develop a "negative communicative reaction," and, most helpfully, during the final phase, when deadlines were past.

We offer our ultimate words of gratitude to all those patients whom we were able to help work through a depressive illness and who in turn were able to help us understand the depressive experience.

E. J. A.
T. B.

Contributing Authors

E. James Anthony, M.D.
Blanche F. Ittleson Professor of Child Psychiatry, Director of the William Greenleaf Eliot Division of Child Psychiatry, and Director of the Harry Edison Child Development Research Center, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis; Training and Teaching Analyst, Institutes for Psychoanalysis, Chicago and St. Louis

Michael Franz Basch, M.D.
Associate Director, Center for Psychosocial Studies; Training and Supervising Analyst, The Institute for Psychoanalysis, Chicago

Therese Benedek, M.D.
Senior Staff Member Emeritus, The Institute for Psychoanalysis, Chicago

George L. Engel, M.D.
Professor of Psychiatry and Professor of Medicine, University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry, Rochester, New York

Horacio Fábrega, Jr., M.D.
Professor of Psychiatry and Anthropology, Michigan State University College of Human Medicine, East Lansing

Jan Fawcett, M.D.
Professor and Chairman, Department of Psychiatry, Rush Medical College of Rush University; Chairman, Department of Psychiatry, Presbyterian–St. Luke's Hospital, Chicago

Sherman C. Feinstein, M.D.
Clinical Associate Professor, The University of Chicago Division of the Biological Sciences and Pritzker School of Medicine; Director, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Training Program, Michael Reese Hospital and Medical Center, Chicago

Arnold I. Goldberg, M.D.
Clinical Associate Professor, The University of Chicago Division of the Biological Sciences and Pritzker School of Medicine; Attending Psychiatrist, Michael Reese Hospital and Medical Center, Chicago

Roy R. Grinker, Sr., M.D.
Chairman and Director, Psychiatric Institute of Michael Reese Hospital and Medical Center; Professor of Psychiatry, The University of Chicago Division of the Biological Sciences and Pritzker School of Medicine, Chicago

Edith Jacobson, M.D.
Visiting Professor Emeritus, Department of Psychiatry, Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University, New York

Arnold J. Mandell, M.D.
Professor and Cochairman, Department of Psychiatry, University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine, La Jolla

Mortimer Ostow, M.D.
Visiting Professor of Pastoral Psychiatry, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York

George H. Pollock, M.D., Ph.D.
Director, The Institute for Psychoanalysis; Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Northwestern University Medical School, Chicago

Arthur H. Schmale, Jr., M.D.
Professor of Psychiatry and Associate Professor of Medicine, University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry; Psychiatrist and Physician, Strong Memorial Hospital, Rochester, New York

David S. Segal, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychiatry, University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine, La Jolla

George Winokur, M.D.
Professor and Head of Department of Psychiatry and Director, State Psychopathic Hospital, The University of Iowa College of Medicine, Iowa City

Edward A. Wolpert, M.D., Ph.D.
Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry, The University of Chicago Division of the Biological Sciences and Pritzker School of Medicine; Director of Clinical Services, Institute for Psychosomatic Research and Training, Michael Reese Hospital and Medical Center, Chicago

Introduction

And the most tragic problem of philosophy is to reconcile intellectual necessities with the necessities of the heart and the will. For it is on this rock that every philosophy that pretends to resolve the eternal and tragic contradiction, the basis of our existence, breaks to pieces.

—*Unamuno*

EXISTENTIALISM AND ITS RELATION TO PSYCHOANALYSIS

Existentialism derives from *existence*, a word with many connotations. Etymologically, it originates from the Latin *existere*, meaning to step forth, to emerge, to come into being, or to exist. *Existential* refers to a grounding in the experience of existence and to the empirically rather than the theoretically formulated concept. The term *existentialism* is defined by *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* as

an introspective humanism or theory of man that holds that human existence is not exhaustively describable or understandable in either scientific or idealistic terms and relies upon a phenomenological approach that emphasizes the analysis of critical borderline situations in man's life and especially of such intensely subjective phenomena as anxiety, suffering, and feelings of guilt in order to show the need for making decisive choices through a utilization of man's freedom . . . a theory stating that man's individual existence precedes his essence* and stressing his responsibility for fashioning his self.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* illuminates the philosophical meaning of "existential" by citing Paul Tillich: "anxiety is existential

* This is contrary to Plato, who maintained that the *idea* was prior to *existence* and that it was the essence of existence that changed with time and space. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas challenged this view and argued that if the immortal *ideas* were the essence of man, then man would be immortal. And six centuries later, Husserl was insisting that it was man's "flesh and blood that individuated the universal essence" [14].

in . . . that it belongs to existence as such and not to an abnormal state of mind." Our task in this Introduction is to show that depression is also an existential component of existence, different from yet interrelated with anxiety, and that it is not necessarily pathological.

These various definitions do not conflict with the basic tenets of psychoanalysis. A confrontation of psychoanalysis and existentialism is long overdue, and although we cannot attempt that larger task here, some comparisons and contrasts may help to sharpen the psychoanalytic view of existence.

Both disciplines base their approach on the fact of human existence, and both attempt to come to terms with the brute facts of life and death. Both, according to Barret [3], place emphasis on the individual in contrast to universal man. Both have been criticized for being literary productions, psychoanalysis as "second-rate literature" and existentialism as "poor poetry," and both have been dismissed by some as "mystical." Yet who can deny that the two come closer to the heart of life than the traditional psychologies and philosophies? This has been nicely put by Murdoch [19] in contrasting the two worlds of academic and existential philosophy: the academic world is one "in which people play cricket, bake cakes, make simple decisions, remember their childhood and go to the circus"; and the latter is a world "in which they commit sins, fall in love, say prayers or join the Communist party." The world of psychoanalysis, like the world of existentialism, contains the twin dreads of anguish and depression as an integral part of human experience. To be academically alive is not, therefore, synonymous with being authentically alive and marked by what Heidegger [13] has called the *existentialia*, or the basic categories of existence, namely, the mood that penetrates and permeates our whole being, the existential understanding that goes beyond our ordinary conceptual understanding, and language, whether spoken or silent, that is beyond talking and is rooted in being. Only in this existential sense can a person be said to exist, and without it there is no existence. The situation is summed up in Kierkegaard's little joke of the absentminded professor who is so abstracted from his own life that he hardly knows he exists until, one fine morning, he wakes up to find himself dead!

What goes on between people as portrayed by existentialism is also evocative of psychoanalysis.

> Two people are talking together. They understand each other, and they fall silent—a long silence. This silence is language; it may speak more eloquently than any words. In their mood they are attuned to each other; they may even reach down into that understanding which lies below the level of articulation. The three—mood, understanding, and speech—thus interweave and are one [3].

This holds true for the experiential aspect of psychoanalysis in which intuition and empathy play a significant role in understanding the feelings of oneself and the other, even with silence. Experience is at the core of both disciplines. It is the business of neither to analyze anxiety and dread for the purpose of domesticating their immediate quality or of formalizing the terrors of existence of "being-in-inescapable-situations," as in the spirit of Greek tragedy. Both disciplines practice a return, in Husserl's words, "to the things themselves" rather than to the prefabricated conceptions that are often put in their place [14].

Existentialism has been as courageous in shunning the reassuring illusions of everyday life as has psychoanalysis. Each has confronted *nothingness* in its own specific ways. Heidegger opened up contemporary eyes to the horrors of nonbeing, and Freud to the fears of castration and death. Religion, as an alternative approach to the understanding of life and death, received very serious consideration from both sides. Freud concentrated on the obvious fact that religion does not keep its promises, although it endured because ordinary man had a need for "a system of doctrines and pledges that on the one hand explains the riddle of this world to him with an enviable completeness, and on the other assures him that a solicitous Providence is watching over him and will make up to him in a future existence any shortcomings in this life." [11]. Freud was uncompromising in his relentless pursuit of a rational understanding of the cosmos even though this entailed, as with Oedipus, "wisdom through suffering."

At times, perhaps not unconnected with the vicissitudes of his own life, Freud's pessimism came to the forefront as he envisioned the "dark, unfeeling and unloving powers" [10] that appeared to determine human destiny. Yet, in spite of this preoccupation with the long shadow cast by death, guilt, and fear on man's existence, compelling him to overcompensate with a self-defensive egotism, it was clear to Freud that Eros, not Thanatos, was victorious. Freud could not have functioned as an empathic therapist if his pessimism had been all-pervasive and persistent. Nor should Sartre's statement that "human life begins on the far side of despair" [23] be regarded as reflecting the existentialist position. Psychoanalysis, as Schafer [25] points out, is concerned not with pessimism but with a "tragic vision of man" as contrasted with the romantic view typified in so many of the humanistic ideologies. According to this view, man painfully struggles to the realization that he himself is always the unconscious saboteur of his luck, his love, and his life, and that he is constantly reenacting the pathos of the Oedipus complex. This sense of the tragic is not an invitation to pessimism and despair—which Klein

has referred to as the "products of a traumatized romanticism" [18]—but involves the shedding of self-pity and the accepting of responsibility for one's life and one's decisions.

Existential philosophy deals with affects as experiential phenomena. The psychiatrist-philosopher Jaspers [15] carries us one step further in his phenomenology of the human condition, with its four component parts of death, suffering, conflict, and guilt. The phenomenological approach attempts to dissect the affects and to find qualitative and even quantitative shadings in the emotions. At the heart of his existential position, man is concerned with man because "in the world, man alone is the reality which is accessible to me . . . man is the place at which and through which everything that is real exists for us at all. To fail to be human would mean to slip into nothingness. What man is and can become is a fundamental question for man" (Kaufman [16]). His tragic vision is summed up in the statement: "*Grenzsituationen erfahren und Existieren ist Dasselbe* [To experience inescapable situations and to exist are the same thing"]. The major inescapable situation is death, the fear of which is in two forms: the fear of nonexistence and the fear of nothingness. Life and death are interwoven intimately, as brothers living with each other. The element of starkness is very much an integral element of the philosophy: one stands face to face with life, and one takes an authentic attitude toward death. The latter involves taking death into oneself and considering it as a real possibility at any moment.

Like other existential thinkers, Jaspers is deeply concerned with the question of choice, which must be made consciously, without coercion, compulsion, or condemnation. In this sense a man is the choice that he makes, or to rephrase it in the transformed Cartesian axiom, "*Indem ich wahle, bin ich* [I choose, therefore I am]" [15]. One is reminded here of the analytic process that attempts to carry the patient metaphorically to the famous crossroads before Thebes, where, having opened up all the dark mysteries to consciousness, it sets him in the position of making a free choice.

Although existential philosophy and psychoanalysis are concerned with the destiny of the individual in his human existence, they also endeavor to develop universal explanatory concepts. The two major parts of psychoanalysis, instinct and ego, can be considered in two separate functional ways: the former in terms of the experiential method and the discoveries stemming from it and the latter by the conceptual method and the theories that have evolved from it. This would seem to be a special case of bifurcation (a term first used by Descartes and subsequently adopted by Whitehead [27] in his theory

of prehensions) in which there is a gap between actual and conceptual feeling, between experience and its explanation. Here the two disciplines are at variance: existentialism looks fairly for the meaning of the affective experience while psychoanalysis searches for the cause in the past, the meaning in the present, and the forecast for the future. Psychoanalysis is, therefore, a bipolar system in which the experiential and empirical quality of instinct is felt while, at the same time, the causes and meanings and conjectures are built into a logical framework of hypotheses.

One could, therefore, maintain that one aspect of Freud was intuitively existential but that he moved beyond this. His great discovery was a method that opened an observable way to the unconscious areas of the mind, namely analysis, and what followed were attempts at understanding this momentous discovery. Others, in the past, had examined themselves, but all their conclusions were predictable and were cast within a conventional framework of human understanding. It was Freud who first took the apparently impossible step through the encircling barriers of defenses built up by the individual and connected feelings with the unconscious layers of the mind. It is in these respects that psychoanalysis is radically different from existentialism.

Existential philosophers, excluding Heidegger and Jaspers, have been criticized as being excessively morbid and preoccupied with anxiety (the experience of their own neuroses), and the exclusion of any reference to hope is a striking feature although hope must be regarded as an existential concept. Hopelessness as an attribute of the conservation-withdrawal type of depression has been regarded as a primary affect, but hope is an attitude inherent in life instinct. It is integrating in its function and projects into the future.

How does man face all the illusions, the losses, and the setbacks of life without sinking into despair? The answer lies in the prevalence and endurance of hope. Man cannot live without it, and the instinctual need for it is one of the sources of religion. Where does it come from? It would be reductionistic to think of it as an outcome of the infantile cycle of hunger and satiation. It is probably coterminous with life itself, a manifestation of the life energy directed toward growth, toward becoming, toward the future. It could be regarded as the psychic representation of this universal tendency. Only French [9], among psychoanalysts, has paid attention to the influence of hope in psychodynamic processes, regarding it as a factor in the integration of behavior.

In a remarkable nonanalytic work written almost sixty years ago by Shand, a meticulous dissection of hope is carried out and its relation