CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY?

EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Existential psychology is the branch of psychology that deals with each human being's relationship to the most essential life dilemmas, the so-called big questions of life. Existential psychology also aims to capture the spirit and feeling of life itself rather than subsuming life under a system of logical and systematic categories. Furthermore, existential psychology aims to include basic philosophical reflections in our psychological understanding, at the same time constituting the foundation for existential therapy, counselling and coaching.

Existential psychology is truly a branch of psychology proper; that is, a field of research with concepts and theories about the world that may be validated or refuted empirically. It certainly builds on existential philosophy, which may be defined as our basic thinking about life and the conditions governing life. Using this philosophy as a foundation, existential psychology is the sum total of concepts, theories and empirical knowledge that tells us how human beings interact with the big issues of life and how the basic conditions governing life emerge and are dealt with in everyday life situations. The main application of existential psychology at present lies within therapy. Existential therapy explicitly invites the client or patient to find their feet when confronted with the most important life issues.

So, there are three existential disciplines building upon each other: philosophy, psychology and therapy. Psychology is the body of knowledge that leads you from philosophy to therapy. You do not need to be an 'existentialist', a term used in a wide variety of ways, in order to profit from the fertile insights of existential psychology. You just need an open mind.

THE REAL PERSON AND THE ROLE OF PHENOMENOLOGY

Mainstream psychology imposes a large number of categories on life. These categories constitute the spectacles through which we observe human life.

Thus within the realms of clinical psychology and psychotherapy, we are not primarily trained in observing specific human beings in all their individuality and complexity. Rather, we are taught to observe cases of 'Panic Anxiety', 'Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder', 'Dysthymic Disorder' and 'Somatisation' as outlined in the ICD or DSM diagnostic systems.

Within the psychology of personality, we are urged to look for the so-called 'big five'; that is, five broad dimensions of traits according to which the human personality is said to be organised: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness to experience (John & Srivastura, 1999, pp. 102ff).

It is often useful to classify, but how can psychologists, psychiatrists and other therapists learn to see unique individuals rather than types? This is where phenomenology comes in. Phenomenology observes or experiences the phenomena as they appear in themselves; that is, it ventures beyond the many ideas, stereotypes and images that we carry with us and impose on the phenomena we meet. Phenomenology is to meet the phenomenon in itself. You try to perceive the other person as they really are, the real person, without taking anything for granted. Look at this example:

> A nurse was looking in on an old man in a nursing home shortly before Christmas. 'So, Mr Smith, where are you going to celebrate Christmas this year?' she asked encouragingly while she washed him. 'Here'. Mr Smith's answer was cross and morose as usual. 'Well', she continued supportively, 'then perhaps someone will come and visit you here?'. 'No!' was the answer.
>
> The nurse felt both enraged and astounded. She knew for a fact that the old man had seven brothers and sisters living in neighbouring towns. Many of them could easily have put him up on Christmas Eve. She contacted his GP, who got angry and started phoning the man's family. He finally got hold of a sister: 'Oh, we would so much like to have him and we invited him a long time ago, but he would rather celebrate Christmas on his own in the nursing home. What are we going to do?'

What we observe here is a committed and competent nurse who is convinced that she *knows* what her patient wants: she does not need to ask him. According to phenomenology, however, we never know what another person wants, not even our own spouse or child. We have to ask and listen carefully.

When two people talk to each other, each of them usually makes assumptions about the world-view of the other person: I tend to assume that I look at the world in the same way as the other person. This tendency is particularly strong when the conversation has to do with life's meaning and values. Many misunderstandings arise when people in different life situations or from different cultural backgrounds meet. We also see this pattern in professional conversations.

Phenomenology breaks up this pattern. A phenomenological conversation will – as I show later – usually make a person feel deeply understood and well received. The person will come to life because the authentic, detailed rendering of his or her life experience will lead that person to unfold and become present in the room as he or she really is.

Phenomenology was originally an important philosophical school, founded by Edmund Husserl and further developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger and a number of other prominent philosophers during the first half of the twentieth century. We can understand the world correctly only when we include the observing subject in our thinking. That is one tenet of this philosophical approach. The world is not just there – not without us. We can understand ourselves or another human being only if we acknowledge that we human beings exist solely in our relatedness to the world. We do not exist in isolation (Heidegger, 1926, pp. 58–63; Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 491–492).

The philosophy of phenomenology later gave rise to methods and approaches for the empirical disciplines of sociology, psychology and anthropology; as well as for the applied fields of psychotherapy and counselling.

In psychology, the phenomenological research methods were specifically developed by Amadeo Giorgi and his colleagues at the Duquesne University and Saybrook Graduate School in San Francisco. Giorgi founded the *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*. In his book *Psychology as a human science* (Giorgi, 1970), Giorgi argues that psychology should belong to the human sciences, not to the natural sciences. He criticises the psychology of his time for its tendency to determine its contents by what can be measured rather than by the significance of the topic, meaning that topics like crying, laughing, friendship and love remain essentially unexamined. He speaks, characteristically, about the human sciences rather than the humanities: His goal is to unite the humanities with rigorous science. The road to this unity lies in phenomenology.

In psychotherapy and counselling, the application of phenomenology has been demonstrated by Ernesto Spinelli in a series of case stories (Spinelli, 1997). Spinelli points out three special rules of the phenomenological method when used in psychology and therapy:

1. Put your expectations and preconceptions as a psychologist or therapist in parenthesis and openly embrace the specific world presented by the client. This rule is called *the rule of parenthesis* or the *epoché* rule.
2. Describe, do not explain; do away with all explanations and all causal thinking and describe, describe, describe as concretely, down-to-earth and in as much detail as at all possible. This is *the rule of description*. For instance, ask the client to describe in detail the situation in which they live or how

they feel today or right now, but do not ask them to conjure up causal factors for their present misery.

3. When your description includes several elements, you should avoid emphasising any one element for as long as possible. Do not highlight any of the elements as particularly important. Let all elements be equally significant for as long as possible, lest you prematurely impose a pattern on the material. What is important will emerge when the time is ripe. This rule is called *the rule of horizontalisation* or the rule of equivalisation (Spinelli, 2005, pp. 19ff).

Throughout this book, I will present a number of illustrations that demonstrate how the phenomenological approach can be fruitful in understanding essential psychological phenomena such as happiness, love and loneliness. Phenomenology is also an important way of accepting and respecting cultural differences. Our basic life questions and life dilemmas, as described by existential psychology, have different cultural expressions that all deserve a precise description.

CAN PSYCHOLOGY BE ABOUT LIFE ITSELF?

Many psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists and counsellors enter their chosen field because they are attracted by the pulsating and varied nature of human life. They are fascinated by sensing the many unique ways in which human beings can unfold their lives. They love to relate to others and to help them unravel from their misery and redirect their lives in a more constructive direction.

These professionals need a body of psychological knowledge and understanding that respects their interest in specific human lives without reducing these lives to abstract categories, cause-and-effect relationships and statistical averages.

Amadeo Giorgi proposes the term *life world* as the crux of such a psychology. The relationships between living persons and the worlds in which they live should be the central focus; hence, all phenomena that we study must be understood as involving both the individual and the surrounding world (Giorgi, 1970, pp. 17ff). Earlier in the history of psychology, a similar intellectual project was carried out by the outstanding psychologist Kurt Lewin. In his so-called field theory, Lewin wanted to conceptualise 'the life space, containing the person and his psychological environment' (Lewin, 1938, p. 2).

Whether we talk about life worlds or life space, our language makes it quite difficult to convey the person–world connection of human beings, because

our language disunites the totality into a subject and an object. It is almost impossible to write about 'unfolding your life' or 'realising your potentialities' without presenting the image of an isolated and delimited individual. The description conjures up an image of an individual that occasionally connects with other things and persons, but who is fundamentally alone. The very idea of a person who makes choices, lives through crises, relates to death and finds meaning in life is difficult to describe without at the same time evoking the notion of a person with a delimited body and a delimited psyche.

This is not how the life-world totality of a human being is in fact made up. Human beings are always in relationships – we live in them and through them. We are nurtured by them and produce through them; everything that a human being gives and receives, from birth until death, evolves through relationships. Probably we are nothing other than the combined sum of our relationships, and, once we have entered into them, our relationships cannot be done away with. Even if we decide never again to see someone who was once close to us, we will carry the relationship with us in our future life.

Medard Boss suggests abolishing the term 'psyche' to signify the seat of our mental faculties (Boss, 1994, Ch 8). Instead, he speaks of the person's *being-in-the-world*. The notion of the other person as a being-in-the-world sums up the crucial person–world connection, but it quickly becomes linguistically clumsy. When you read the following pages, please keep in mind that our language forces the author to focus on the person and the life process as such, making it difficult to account for the contexts in which our lives are continuously unfolding. The text presents the basic life concepts as if they resided within the individual. Please remember, however, that life feeling, life courage and life energy always develop in continuous interaction with the world.

THREE BASIC LIFE CONCEPTS: LIFE FEELING, LIFE COURAGE AND LIFE ENERGY

Life Feeling

Sometimes you are flooded with a poignant sensation of really being alive. At other times you feel tired, heavy, bored or dead. Most people have a strong preference for the sense of being alive, so it should be interesting to explore what characterises such life-world situations. In an interview study conducted by the author, a number of people were asked this question:

> Sometimes one feels full of energy or particularly alive. Can you describe a situation in which you have felt particularly alive?

The results were summarised like this:

> Some people feel particularly alive in connection with *practical and other physical tasks*. A man who has recently moved into a new house together with his wife says: 'Now I really feel like keeping things neat and tidy (…) once in a while, I do the window sills and clean the windows. And just the other day, I cleaned the bathroom (…) With our new house, I really feel like doing something.'
>
> *Sports activities* make some people feel particularly alive. A former carpenter used to bike race as a young man. His motto was: 'I can, I must and I will … and then I won,' he says. 'The longer the race was, the harder it was, the better it was for me (…) I wasn't afraid to use my strength. And my body! It just felt so good doing it.'
>
> Others feel particularly alive when they are in *social relationships*, among family and friends. A grandmother of three says: 'I always feel particularly alive when my grandchildren come to visit, especially when the little one comes (…) when Laura is here, you just have to be particularly alive because she's doing so many crazy things.' Another woman emphasises the feeling that other people need her; that she has something to give. Then she feels alive: 'It gives me an enormous kick, you can feel that you are bloody well alive (…) there is someone who actually needs you.'
>
> Still others feel alive when focused on their *own inner being*. They may experience their own inner processes both bodily and mentally. A man has begun to practice Tai Chi. When he is doing this, he feels particularly alive: 'The first time I was in the Tai Chi-room, I felt that I was bubbling with life (…) I felt a lot of energy (…) I actually felt a tingling from the soles of my feet and all the way up … and I thought, "My God, how wonderful it is to be alive." I really felt that.' A woman describes how, after she fell ill, she has developed a special inner feeling of being alive. 'Even if I won a million dollars I wouldn't feel as alive as I did on Easter morning when I went for a walk alone (…) I feel all bubbly inside. And really feel at one with life.'
>
> Finally, some people feel alive *outdoors*. A woman says: 'When I'm in contact with nature or when I'm out at sea, then I feel particularly alive. Especially now, during the summer holidays. We stayed in a summer cottage by the sea, and that made me feel very much alive (…) My thoughts seem extremely clear. I feel good. I think it's the water and the vast expanse.'
>
> Someone else says: 'I simply got new energy from being at the seaside. To lie down on the beach and to have the wild wind blow warm sand on my body, and then to throw myself into the waves. To sit and watch the sunset every evening. That was new energy for me. Life energy means that I can get up in the morning and feel joy over my existence. Just knowing that I'm here.'

Other respondents talk about living intensely when they are involved in their work projects, or when they are reading, travelling, doing voluntary social work, being with their beloved, fishing, gardening and a multitude of other activities. Perhaps each human being has their special world of activity and unfolding, their special space for intense living. We all have situations in which we feel alive with particular intensity. At the other end of the scale, people

may even feel that they do not live at all. They feel dead inside. They may even feel that life has come to a complete standstill and will not commence until they do something else or go live with someone else.

However, whether we feel more or less alive at any given moment, as human beings we all have an idea about what *it means* for us – in our own lives – to be more or less alive.

So what is at the core of feeling alive? Rollo May describes what he calls the *'I-am'-experience* (May, 1983, pp. 99ff). It is the spontaneous experience of just being here. Simply because I am here, I also have the right to be here, the right to exist. I experience my own being and develop life feeling. If a person can spontaneously experience that they live, they will thereby get to know their own basic values. Opinions about good and bad, right and wrong are not just taken over from parents and society: They grow organically out of our selves.

Ronald D Laing has also described an aspect of our life feeling. He has coined the term 'ontological security' and the antonym 'ontological insecurity' (Laing, 1965, pp. 39ff). A person can have a sense of their being in the world as a real, alive and whole person who lives in temporal continuity. This person can step forward and meet others with clarity. Laing calls such a person ontologically secure. They, says Laing, will meet the trials of life on the basis of a firm feeling of their own and other people's identity and reality.

In psychotic states we see the opposite: a lack of existential foundation. In these states we find individuals who feel fundamentally unreal, not alive, not whole and with unclear boundaries.

Also Jon Kabat-Zinn in his work on stress and meditation captures the phenomenon of life feeling. He teaches his patients 'to taste their own wholeness as they are, right now (…) to accept ourselves right now, as we are, symptoms or no symptoms, pain or no pain, fear or no fear' (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, pp. 279–280).

The above examples of feeling alive are expressions of life feeling in its purest form. In some of them, other elements such as the need to perform or the need to be loved are admixed with the quintessential life feeling. But in all of them, the life feeling is lucid; reading the examples, you sense the nurturing and healing nature of these experiences.

Life Courage

Life feeling is an important component in life courage. But the courage to live encompasses more than life feeling, pure and simple. According to Paul Tillich, existential theologian and philosopher, life courage, that is the courage to be, is a phenomenon comprising both a natural component (something that is part of living in itself) and a moral component (something that one strives for). The courage to live is a conscious attitude in which one affirms one's

being alive in spite of what works against this basic affirmation of life. The opposites are fear and anxiety. Courage is 'the power of the mind to overcome fear' (Tillich, 1980, p. 34). In other words, the courage to live is equivalent to choosing to live: *to add one's power of decision to the natural life process*.

Courage fights against fear and anxiety. Courage can easily pinpoint fear, which is manifestly directed towards an object. Anxiety, which lacks a definite object, is more difficult to isolate. The basic struggle of the human being thus stands between anxiety and courage. And the anxiety in question is existential anxiety.

According to Tillich, *existential anxiety* assumes three forms, each of them interconnected and each leading to the other. The most basic form is anxiety of fate and death. This anxiety threatens the individual's sense of having the right to exist. The second form is anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness. This type of anxiety threatens the spiritual dimensions of the individual, as well as the individual's longing for meaning. The third form is anxiety of guilt and condemnation. This type of anxiety threatens the moral identity of the individual (Tillich, 1980, pp. 40ff).

These three forms of existential anxiety belong within the normal spectrum. Pathological anxiety is a distortion of these forms. If a human being lacks the courage to confront their existential anxiety, they may flee into neurosis. Such a person will tend to abandon living freely and openly by building up rigid patterns of defence, security and perfection.

Many of the anxiety states that ordinary people struggle with in their everyday lives and present in the consultation rooms of doctors and psychologists may be fruitfully understood on the basis of Tillich's three types of existential anxiety: (1) the anxiety of a patient with chronic pain; (2) the sense of emptiness of somebody who has recently been divorced; or (3) the feeling of being condemned experienced by the assault victim – all of these examples may be understood meaningfully as existential anxiety according to Tillich's categories. Pathological anxiety, says Tillich, is a result of the person's inability to confront their existential anxiety (Tillich, 1980, p. 77). If the doctor or the psychologist tries to reduce a state of anxiety to a limited condition that should be removed from the person, they will also tend to impair the life quality of that person, because they risk removing the existential rootedness of the individual along with the anxiety. This is why it is so important to combine the frequently used cognitive-behavioural therapy with an existential perspective (see Hayes *et al.*, 1999). It is, of course, even more important that any medical treatment of anxiety should be combined with a therapeutic session delving into existential discussion.

Existential anxiety cannot be removed; it belongs to and is part of life itself. But existential anxiety adds an essential contribution of its own to life, namely the

quality of *self-affirmation* that it invokes. Anxiety has the unexpected quality of bringing about individual fortitude. Let us compare this with the way in which bacteria elicit the production of valuable antibodies that would otherwise not have been developed. The bacteria call forth antibodies; they in turn provide resilience. Anxiety sparks self-affirmation, which is then transformed into courage, turning people into courageous beings in the process (Tillich, 1980, pp. 32ff).

Hence life courage may be defined as a fundamental, spontaneous *life feeling* combined with a consciously chosen *courage to live*, developed through the confrontation with existential anxiety. *Life courage is a basic mood or attunement in a person that tells us about this person's wish to live, their basic character, and their will to face life's challenges and difficulties.*

Life Energy (Vitality)

Among the seriously ill, we encounter a phenomenon that nobody can explain. A doctor may have two patients with the same ailment, a fatal disease. They have the disease in approximately the same degree and the doctor's prognosis is that they both have about six months left to live. Subsequently, one patient fades and dies quickly, while the other perks up inexplicably, developing their own healing resources and surviving perhaps another 10 years.

In medical literature, patients who defy all negative prognoses are called 'exceptional patients'. But why do some wane before their time while others seem to resuscitate themselves? What is it that makes some people cave in when faced with moderate adversity while others persevere despite the most unbelievable difficulties?

By the term *life energy* or *vitality* we understand the ability of the organism *to survive*. Life energy is an organismic variable. While life courage is a basic attunement that can be experienced from within, life energy is a trait that can be observed from the outside. Based on certain signs in a human being or other organism, an observer will get an impression of high or low life energy.

> A neonatal ward occasionally receives infants with a foetal age of 5–6 months. For some days, these premature children hover between life and death. Doctors and nurses observe them and speculate on who among them will survive. They often use words like life force, life energy and the will to live: This infant will probably live, even though he is among the youngest. That one would die, they thought, but life still remained strong in the organism. That infant had an unexpected amount of life energy.

From the moment they are born, human infants are endowed with varying amounts of life energy or vitality. This life energy seems to stay with the

children as they grow up. This does not mean to say that it is purely biologically or genetically determined. There is every reason to believe that psychological and sociocultural factors codetermine the magnitude of the life force, and increasingly so during the course of life.

This life force determines the expectations of survival of an adult suffering from a fatal disease and the length of the lifespan of an older person.

How may we understand the nature of life energy? There are two opposing views:

On the one hand, life energy may be seen as a *purely biological phenomenon*. Different dandelions have different height, strength and powers of survival. Dogs and horses have different sizes, strength and powers of survival. Human beings, too, are born with different sizes, strength and powers of survival and, consequently, with different vitality. The biological view is supported by the genetic fact that longevity seems to run in families.

On the other hand, life energy is also viewed as an *existential* or *bio-spiritual phenomenon*. The biological level and the spiritual level are united in the realm of existence. By the spiritual level we understand the human being's search for a higher meaning. One advocate of this view is Paul Tillich. Tillich sees the life courage mentioned above as an expression of the person's vitality. Decreasing vitality leads to decreasing courage, and strengthened vitality provides strengthened courage. Neurotic individuals, he says, lack vitality; in other words, they lack biological substance.

Vitality derives not only from the biological level, says Tillich. The vitality emanating from a human being's life cannot be separated from the goals and purposes of that being. Vitality and intentionality are mutually interdependent.

Human beings can transcend any given situation and thereby create something beyond themselves. The more they possess of this creative force, the more vitality they have. In other words, the biological dimensions of humankind are interwoven in a structure of meaning. 'Vitality', says Tillich, 'is not something which can be separated from the totality of man's being, his language, his creativity, his spiritual life, his ultimate concern' (Tillich, 1980, p. 82).

Tillich thus understands vitality as a bio-spiritual phenomenon. Its force comes from the biological and the spiritual levels alike and these levels mingle in the world of existence.

Bio-energetic therapists and other therapists that work with bodily touch often state that they are in direct contact with the life energy or vitality of the client. In spite of the prefix 'bio', many therapists belonging to these schools find that the life energy they stimulate and work with is not entirely biological in nature. They describe the currents of energy as having a more spiritual, cosmic or in other ways strangely lucid character (Boadella, 1987).

Hence the view that life energy is a purely biological phenomenon will not stand against an existential analysis. Even though biological forces are very active indeed in human life, the actions that spring from them always form part of a meaningful social context. Human beings cannot function without goal, meaning and intention. Furthermore, the biological forces are always integrated in a mental frame of reference.

Existentially, life energy must be viewed as bio-spiritual, as a force that integrates biology with what is spiritual and meaningful. Life energy does not remain the same throughout the course of a human lifetime. Much seems to indicate that around the time of birth, life energy is predominantly biological, but also influenced by love and interpersonal contact. Later on, vitality is increasingly transformed into something more specifically marked by the life meaning and life tasks that are unique to each human being, even though it is sustained by a strong biological component throughout life.

In Box 1.1, we summarise our discussion by juxtaposing the three basic concepts of human life processes.

Box 1.1 Three Basic Life Concepts

Life feeling is the person's spontaneous sense of being alive, being coherent and sensing a right to be here.

Life courage is the person's life feeling combined with their determination to conquer fear and anxiety in order to carry out their life project.

Life energy or *vitality* is the ability of the organism to survive even under difficult circumstances and to achieve longevity. Here, the biological component is strong, but our biology is woven into patterns of meaning and intention that codetermine our life energy.

THE BIG QUESTIONS OF LIFE

Some animals seem to live an easy life. A dog or a cat, for example, may spend its whole life eating, sleeping, wandering about, looking, listening, mating and resting. The life of an animal is a life without problems (although life for some animals is periodically unpleasant or momentarily painful). It is a life without reflections on life.

Human beings are compelled to live a life in which they reflect on their own life. All human beings experience moments when they have to choose between alternate courses of action. We all entertain thoughts about when we are going

to die, or how we can achieve a desired goal. We also think about falling ill, getting older, being alone, having enemies and loved ones and about many other aspects of our lives.

As human beings, we are all doomed to reflect on our lives. But this requirement is also a great opportunity to develop ourselves towards higher states that definitely distinguish us from the animals.

According to existential theory, the life reflections we all undertake are not accidental and arbitrary. Although every individual entertains private thoughts about their own life, such thoughts are confined to certain themes that are important, yet limited in number.

Our thoughts on living all derive from the same source: the structure of existence into which we are born. This structure of existence revolves around a finite number of basic life conditions.

As human beings, our options are such that we can either close our eyes to these basic conditions and live falsely or blindly in some kind of make-believe life; or we can choose to look these existentials (for definition, see below) squarely in the eye and learn how to relate to them constructively, thus living more openly and freely, in a more grounded and real way. Existential psychologists use the word *authenticity* to designate this genuine life that is a possibility open to everyone.

The Structure of Existence

There are different catalogues and lists surveying these basic life conditions. The most well-known is Irvin Yalom's enumeration of four basic existential conditions: (1) that we are going to die; (2) that in decisive moments, we are alone; (3) that we have the freedom to choose our life; and (4) that we struggle to create meaning in a world in which our life meaning is not given beforehand (Yalom, 1980). According to Yalom, these four basic conditions constitute a structure that is our premise, something that all human beings are born into. The four conditions set the frame and the agenda for the life of each individual. Many people would rather avoid thinking about, talking about and relating to these basic conditions, including death, but this fact does not weaken their impact, rather the opposite.

Yalom assigns about the same status to these basic conditions as did Freud in his era to sexuality: a force that permeates almost everything and to which most people close their eyes, causing the force to make itself felt in a distorted form.

Another familiar theory about life's basic conditions, developed by Medard Boss, lists seven fundamental traits of human life: (1) human beings live in space; (2) human beings live in time; (3) human beings unfold through their body; (4) human beings live in a shared world; (5) human beings always live

in a particular mood, a certain psychological atmosphere; (6) human beings live in a historic context; and (7) human beings live with the awareness of their own death (Boss, 1994, Ch 7).

These seven basic conditions may be called existentials, core factors in everybody's life. If we look at (2), it is true for all of us that as we live, time goes by. We all have a past, a present and a future; we all live at a specific intersection of the individual time axis that stipulates the beginning and end of each individual lifespan. We all have things that we choose to spend time doing and other things that we do not. It is true for all of us that we cannot use the same time twice. The moment you have read this sentence, it will never come back; a moment can be lived only once. All these temporal dimensions in our life are active and influence us whether we want to think about them or not. Evidence also suggests that we can live more freely and in a more enlightened way if we indeed choose to think about them.

Other existential authors have developed similar lists and overviews of humankind's basic life conditions (Bugental, 1987; Condrau, 1989). As early as half a century ago, however, one particularly interesting exposition was formulated by Erich Fromm, the German-American humanistic psychoanalyst and writer: 'All passions and strivings of man', he writes, 'are attempts to find an answer to his existence' (Fromm, 1956a, pp. 27ff). Fromm then goes on to mention as basic points the individual's fundamental need: (1) for love (relatedness); (2) for transcending oneself; (3) for developing rootedness and a feeling of being at home; (4) for finding one's identity; and (5) for finding one's orientation and meaning in life. According to Fromm, the most specific characteristics of any human being derive from the fact that *our bodily functions belong to the animal kingdom, whereas our mental and social lives belong to a human, conscious world that is aware of itself* (Fromm, 1956, pp. 22ff). Therefore, the satisfaction of our instinctual needs is not sufficient to make us happy. We constantly strive towards discovering new solutions to the rampant contradictions of our existence; towards finding ever higher forms of unity with nature, with our fellow human beings and with ourselves. The fact that even the most prosperous of the world's nations display such massive levels of alcoholism, crime, suicides, drug abuse and boredom testify to this.

The Basic Life Conditions Seen as Life Dilemmas

The basic categories of life conditions proposed by Irvin Yalom, Medard Boss, Erich Fromm and related scholars share many traits. The differences between them are not contradictory in nature, they are in fact supplementary (Jacobsen, 2003).

Irvin Yalom's four categories form the core of this book's structure, but I have expanded them to include dimensions from Medard Boss, Gion Condrau and

Erich Fromm. This theoretical synthesis has resulted in a system of six basic life conditions or life questions, presented below.

The basic life conditions are sometimes seen as relatively straightforward categories or realities, but each may also be viewed as a dilemma representing two opposite poles between which our life is torn and between which it must find a balance. I favour the latter view, seeing the basic conditions as dilemmas, because this view accentuates the choices we always face as human beings. Existential theorists subscribing to this view would suggest that there are a number of given *ontological facts* (e.g. that one day we will die), but that these facts present themselves to us in the form of *life dilemmas*.

In everyday language, we understand a dilemma as a situation in which we are faced with a difficult choice between two alternatives, A and B. You cannot have both at the same time.

By a *life dilemma* we understand a situation in which the choice stands between two poles that both fall within what we normally expect out of life. Both belong to what you perceive to be a reasonable or happy life. But you cannot see how you can reconcile them or integrate them. For some people, 'to be oneself' or 'to be with others' is such a dilemma. The life question you might stop and think about in such a situation is this: How can I find and define myself (something that I usually do on my own) and at the same time bond intimately with friends and loved ones? Existential psychology deals with that type of question. Existential therapy, as described by van Deurzen (2002) aims at helping the client face such dilemmas. Life questions are the questions that we human beings raise in relation to the life dilemmas.

For the purposes of this theoretical synthesis, the existential theories have been integrated into six basic life dilemmas and life questions. Each of them forms the content of one of the subsequent chapters of the book. Here they are, each formulated as life dilemmas and life questions:

1. *Happiness vs Suffering* (Chapter 2): How can I strive towards happiness when I know that my life will inevitably contain suffering?
2. *Love vs Aloneness* (Chapter 3): Is it possible to overcome my basic aloneness in a love relationship? Can I still be myself in a love relationship? And is it at all possible to find love in this world?
3. *Adversity vs Success* (Chapter 4): When I find myself in dire straits following an accident or a loss or some other serious life event, how can I deal with that situation in such a way that I will grow from it instead of shrinking and getting stuck?
4. *Death Anxiety vs Life Commitment* (Chapter 5): Knowing that death can arrive at any time, how can I transcend my anxiety and commit myself fully to life?

5. *Free Choice vs the Obligations of Your Life Reality* (Chapter 6): Given the physical, financial and social realities of my life and origin, which I did not ask for, how can I make these realities my own positive and constructive choice? And how can I create a worthwhile future life through my choices?
6. *Life Meaning vs Meaninglessness* (Chapter 7): Given the chaotic character of our present world, how may I define the meaning and values of my life and find a clear direction for it?

The dilemmas are interconnected. If, for instance, you are exposed to sudden adversity or deep suffering or somebody's sudden death you will very likely at the same time get into contact with your basic feeling of aloneness or with a sense of life's meaninglessness. And if you are lucky to experience deep love, you will very likely at the same time get a feeling of your life as being happy and meaningful. Such interconnections have been pointed out by Yalom (1980) and Condrau (1989) and many other existential authors. The interconnectedness stems from the fact that our basic ontology is universal and its implications for our existence therefore interrelated.

We are all torn between the opposites that constitute the six dilemmas mentioned above. You could even add the fundamental dilemma mentioned by Erich Fromm of uniting the biology-driven animal part and the conscious, cultural and spiritual part of our being. Am I primarily an animal? Or am I primarily a conscious, thinking, ethical being? And in what ways can I unite these poles? That could be seen as the seventh, foundational and overarching existential dilemma, governing all our lives as human beings.

How to navigate your way through the abovementioned dilemmas along a constructive path is what life is all about, and certainly what existential psychology is about.

To the extent that you succeed in finding your own two feet in relation to these life questions and dilemmas, to that extent, the existential psychologists would say, you live an authentic life.

WHAT IS IT TO LIVE AUTHENTICALLY?

As a human being you are confronted with a highly important choice concerning your own life. Either you can say, I'll do like everyone else, I'll do what others expect me to do, I'll try to *be* like the others. Or you can say, I believe there are some choices that are more important and more right or true for me than certain other choices. I must find out which are the important and right things for me to do and I will try to live accordingly.

In existential psychology, the latter choice is called *to live authentically*. Authentic means genuine or known to be true. To live authentically means to live truthfully; that is, in accordance with your own deep convictions, beliefs and

values. Indeed, some writers would add: in accordance with yourself and your bodily nature and temperament. To live authentically also means to find your own two feet in relation to the basic life dilemmas mentioned above.

The existential philosopher and theologian John Macquarrie defines authenticity like this: Life is authentic to the extent that the individual has taken possession of their own self and moulded that self in their own image. Inauthentic existence is moulded by external factors, whether they are circumstances, moral codes, political and religious authorities, or other influences (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 206).

The existential definition of authentic living, says Macquarrie, has more to do with form than with content. It is *the shape* of the existence that counts, *the extent* to which it has achieved unity rather than being scattered, *the way* it exercises freedom and self-determination; rather than being determined by the prevailing tastes and standards (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 207). This does not imply that you cannot independently choose to live according to the prevailing tastes and standards. You can and some certainly do.

The moral philosopher Mary Warnock sees authenticity as each human being's ability to fulfil his or her own potential and possibilities. To live authentically is to recognise that each human being is unique and to accept the personal consequence that, this being so, one has to find one's very own determination and realise one's own potential (Warnock, 1970).

The existential therapist Hans Cohn encourages us not to see the concept of authenticity as a goal that can be achieved. All people are inauthentic at certain times; that is part of life (Cohn, 1993). Along similar lines, Martin Heidegger writes that the fact that existence is inauthentic does not mean that it entails less being or a lower level of being. At the same time, authenticity is of course something that is deeply desirable (Heidegger, 2000).

Many people seem to live in a somewhat superficial way for years. They buzz from one activity to the next, play the parts that are required of them, watch TV. They seem to forget the deeper meaning of life and do not appear to know clearly what they are here for. They mechanically perform in the roles and display the attitudes that they think that the others expect of them. When we direct our lives according to the expectations of the others, we live, says Heidegger, in order to follow the 'they' (in German: *das Man*).

Then at a certain point, some people may experience a sudden awakening, as if dramatically summoned to life. Heidegger talks about the call of conscience. When using this term, he does not mean the public conscience, the overall moral codes, but the conscience that comes from the depths of oneself. It is a call from the authentic part of oneself struggling to emerge, to come to life and summon the rest of oneself to life. According to Heidegger, this voice exhorts

the person to take full responsibility for their own life (Heidegger, 2000, pp. 318ff).

How may you best take your own life seriously without at the same time being too burdened by this reflection? One answer is *resoluteness* (Deurzen-Smith, 1995, pp. 13–25). Resolute action is characterised by decisiveness, firmness and determination. Yes means yes, and no means no. Resoluteness means clarity and is often developed following difficult life experiences. The person knows what they want. Resoluteness is related to the person's ability to stay focused and concentrated.

> A woman in her late 50s has been through a crisis. Today she is alive, active and loving when she is with her family. 'Sometimes', she says, 'you simply love life.'
>
> Seventeen years ago her mother died suddenly and without warning. The woman cannot forgive herself that her mother died without their having had the opportunity to talk. 'It has influenced me in the sense that you shouldn't postpone anything. If you have something you want to finish, then you should finish it. Because there are no guarantees that you'll be here tomorrow (…) If there is something that I want to say to someone, I say it now (…) I never got to tell her that I love her more than anything in the world (…)'

To live with resoluteness or determination presupposes a certain clarity of mind as to what you are here for, what counts for you, what you stand for and what you are against. Such clarity is generally acquired by living through a certain number of difficult life situations. A few people seem to be born with this gift of clarity. But all the rest of us have to acquire this clarity of life the hard way. Afterwards, however, we find life incomparably more valuable. There seems to be no easy way to such clarity. For some reason, almost all of us live under the impression that other people have easier access to their accomplishments and results than we do ourselves. But this is usually a false impression.

Once you have acquired a minimum degree of clarity about what you are living for (a subject that is discussed throughout this book), the questions of authenticity and how to take your own life seriously do not appear to be 'heavy' questions. These questions need not weigh you down. It is possible to be authentic and spontaneous at the same time. Medard Boss, one of the fathers of existential therapy, conceives of the authentic life as a life marked by playfulness and humour. His concept of the ideal state of mind, *composed, joyous serenity*, entails ease and heaviness going hand in hand. Playfulness and seriousness embrace one another, as do our knowledge of death and our commitment to life.

Life Regrets and Authenticity

Most people seem to ask themselves quite often: How should my future be? Should I aim at this or that? In the same way, many people reflect upon their

past. Some ruminate. Others discuss with their friends or their partners: Did I do the right things? Did I use my time and meet my challenges in the best possible way?

In an interview study, we put this question to a number of respondents:

> If you could live your life again, would you change anything or would you live it the same way?

Here are some answers:

> 'I would probably have liked to take more part in life (…) instead of sitting back like that (…) and not really dare to join in (…) I have sort of felt that it wasn't really my place to make demands on life (…)' (Woman, 38, secretary)
>
> A woman worked 10 years in her husband's company and didn't like the administrative work in itself or working for her husband. 'It was probably the most stupid thing we ever did in our life together (…) I stayed out of a sense of convenience, right? And I can see that today, of course (…) that it was the most stupid thing (…)' (Woman, 47, former administrative officer)
>
> 'I would probably have lived (…) the life surrounded by nature that perhaps I wanted deep inside. Instead I flowed with the stream by haphazardly starting an education (…) And clearly, if I were to live a new life, I would much rather have stayed married to only one man (…) I think I regret that I married Frank. That is probably what I regret most of all (…) I have had to compromise too much (…)' This woman states that were she to live her life again, she would not marry Frank. Despite many good moments she feels that it was the wrong choice. But with two children, she was between a rock and a hard place, and then Frank was there, generous and with flowers. (Woman, 44, project manager)

As it turns out, all three respondents have had regrets, either occasioned by specific actions or a particular attitude or lifestyle.

Regrets of this type are rather common, but perhaps it takes a certain amount of courage to look them squarely in the eye. There are several ways of dealing with such regrets. Some see them as a fate they cannot change. Others see the dissatisfactions as something they can learn from; partly by correcting things for the remainder of their lives, partly by passing their lesson on to the next generation.

But not everyone is burdened by discontents:

> 'By and large, I would live my life in the same way. I do, however, feel bad about the people that I have somehow let down. I also regret that I didn't get enough out of my university studies, because I had too many other things going on in my life'. (Woman, 27, student)

> 'I would like to live my life again, on exactly the same terms. And that doesn't mean to say that my life has been the easiest of lives; it certainly hasn't. I haven't been spared anything (…) But if you take life as a whole, I would be prepared to take the good things with the bad one more time (…)' (Woman, 63, administrative executive)
>
> 'Well, no, I don't really think I would change anything. I think that I have lived a pretty good life; you know, nice and quiet (…) I have worked in the same place of employment for 43 years and so on and so forth; that seems very much to indicate that my whole life has been satisfactory (…)' (Man, 71, former mason, retired)

These people do not have any regrets gnawing away at their souls. Have they been on the right track all along and been able to stick to what was most important? Or have they been able to live with and accept the deficiencies and ailments that crop up in most lives, enabling them to truly take possession of their lives? We human beings seem to have two ways of coming to terms with former deficiencies: we can redirect our future life or we can condone our past.

Existential Guilt and Authenticity

In existential psychology, life regrets are seen as connected with a specific theory about guilt, the theory of existential guilt. In other schools of psychology and therapy, for example psychoanalysis or cognitive therapy, guilt is mainly seen as a pathological phenomenon and as a symptom that should be treated in some way. Irvin Yalom lists three types of guilt: real guilt, neurotic guilt and existential guilt (Yalom, 1980, p. 276). Real guilt arises if you have damaged another person in real life; if for instance in the process of backing your car into your garage, you crushed your neighbour's leg due to a moment's lack of attention. Neurotic guilt occurs if you have damaged someone only in your imagination. Say for instance that you have to decline your sister's birthday invitation. She perfectly understands, but you cannot let go of a deep, nagging feeling that you have let her down. Existential guilt is a positive element in people's life, as Rollo May also underlines (May, 1983, pp. 114–116). It points out the areas in which you have not as yet lived up to the possibilities that were offered to you, including the possibility to treat others and nature with care and respect. Therefore, although it may be painful, existential guilt is a chance to redirect the rest of your life and to reach some sort of reconciliation with that which cannot be changed.

Authenticity is difficult to define. The definition must be sufficiently open to embrace the fact that the term is infused with meaning by every living person in their own unique way. However, authenticity can be seen as one of the most fruitful and promising concepts in the realm of psychology, paving the way from the discipline of psychology to 'the good life'. This term allows practitioners applying psychological knowledge and psychological theories to demonstrate how psychology is not just for diagnosing maladaptations and

psychological illnesses. Psychology also has to show people how it is possible to develop a more truthful life, to achieve a more vibrant sense of being alive, to develop more happiness, to experience love and to acknowledge what is good and bad in their lives.

WHAT MAKES EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY DIFFERENT?

Existential psychology distinguishes itself from other disciplines within psychology by requiring that the main focus of psychology must be human life and each individual's relation to life's basic conditions and most important questions.

What these big questions are and how they are related to life's everyday events, thoughts, feelings and pursuits will be the subject of the rest of this book. In a similar vein, existential therapy is a kind of therapy where the therapist – in a direct, attentive relationship – stimulates the client to find their own footing in relation to life's crucial questions. In Appendix B you will find a brief description of existential therapy.

Existential psychology and existential therapy have distinctive characteristics in relation to other schools of psychology and therapy. A number of these will be pointed out throughout the book.

Existential psychology differs significantly from mainstream psychology in its explicit focus on essential life questions as the most important subject matter of psychology and in its insistence on the phenomenological perspective. Therefore, psychology should primarily account for life as experienced from within rather than behaviour observed from without. This difference gives existential psychologists less 'safe' knowledge about people's reactions in, say, traffic situations or child development stages, but more understanding of the real aspirations and real-life problems of human beings. It should be noted that we are here talking about psychology as a subject and a research field comprising theoretical and empirical knowledge about human beings, not only in a natural science sense, but in a broader sense comprising social and human science perspectives (Giorgi, 1970, 2001; Schneider, 1998).

Compared with Freudian and Jungian psychology, there are a number of similarities concerning the psychologist's in-depth interest in the lives of individual human beings. An important difference, however, is that the psychoanalytic traditions attach considerable significance to the consequences of childhood events, whereas existential psychologists and therapists are more concerned with an individual's present and future state and with their continuous openness to change. Furthermore, existential psychologists and therapists do not propound interpretations 'behind the backs' of their clients, but advocate detailed descriptions of their life situations and life perspectives.

Compared with cultural and cross-cultural psychology, there are certain differences as to the emphasis placed on cultural variation. However, in the long run the two approaches should be able to complement each other and reach a state of integration.

Existential psychology is related to phenomenological psychology, humanistic psychology, positive psychology and to some of the narrative (social constructivist) trends in psychology. There are also certain differences here, as pointed out in Box 1.2 and in more detail throughout the book.

Box 1.2 Schools of Psychology (as seen from the point of view of Existential Psychology)

Existential Psychology

- Focuses on essential life dilemmas and the big questions of life
- Emphasises both the positive and negative dimensions of life
- Applies mainly phenomenological research methods (studying human life from within).

Humanistic Psychology

- Focuses on human potentialities and virtues
- Emphasises the positive dimensions of life
- Applies mainly phenomenological research methods (studying human life from within).

Positive Psychology

- Focuses on human potentialities and virtues
- Emphasises the positive dimensions of life
- Applies mainly natural science research methods (studying human life from without).

Mainstream Psychology

- Focuses on all aspects of behaviour
- Places a certain emphasis on the negative dimensions of life problems and pathologies
- Applies mainly natural science research methods (studying human life from without).

Together with existential philosophy – its parent discipline – and existential therapy – its main area of application – existential psychology is a truly international accomplishment. The main contributors to the development of existential psychology and its therapeutic application hail from many countries. In Appendix A you will find brief biographies of 23 especially important contributors to this field.

There are a number of books dealing with the fundamentals of existential philosophy. John Macquarrie's *Existentialism* (Macquarrie, 1972) provides an excellent overview. Also, the applied field of existential therapy has been enriched in recent years with quite a number of books. A succinct survey of the therapeutic field has been provided by Mick Cooper in his book *Existential therapies* (Cooper, 2003). For some reason, however, existential psychology, the theoretical and empirical bridge between philosophy and therapy, has been sparsely treated in terms of systematic, coherent expositions. The psychology that was supposed to inform us on how to live our life in the best possible way and how to help our fellow human beings solve their problems in life cannot be found in one single volume. This book is a modest attempt to mend that situation.