

In the Spirit of Play: Applied Existential Psychotherapy

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Abstract

This article discusses Applied Existential Psychotherapy (AEP), a therapeutic approach founded by Betty Cannon and grounded in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. AEP is a synthesis of existential and psychoanalytic insights with interventions drawn from Gestalt therapy, body-oriented psychotherapy, and other experiential approaches. Interventions are intended to be 'playful' and to facilitate movement from what Sartre refers to as the 'spirit of seriousness' to what the authors have named the 'spirit of play' – that is, from a viewpoint that denies freedom and responsibility to one that acknowledges and values one's own and the other's freedom. Discussions of play, drawn from Winnicott and Huizinga, augment the ideas of Sartre. The importance of holding a space for 'existential anxiety' as a client moves from the spirit of seriousness to the spirit of play is emphasised. Brief examples from client notes and demonstration videos fill out the theoretical material.

Keywords: spirit of seriousness, spirit of play, nothingness, freedom, existential anxiety, pre-reflective

Im Geist des Spiels: Angewandte Existentielle Psychotherapie

Zusammenfassung: In diesem Artikel wird der therapeutischen Ansatz von Betty Cannon, welcher in der Philosophie von Jean-Paul Sartre wurzelt, die ‚Angewandte Existentielle Psychotherapie‘ (AEP) vorgestellt. AEP ist eine Synthese aus existenziellen und psychoanalytischer Erkenntnissen, vermischt mit Interventionen aus der Gestalttherapie, körperorientierten Psychotherapie und andere experimentelle Ansätze. Interventionen sollen spielerische sein und die Bewegung auf das hinzu ermöglichen, was Sartre als ‚Geist der Schwere‘ bezeichnet und die Autoren als den ‚Geist des Spiels‘ nennen. Von einem Standpunkt ausgehend, der die Freiheit und die Verantwortung verweigert zu einem der den eigenen Freiheitswert und der der anderen respektiert. Die Diskussionen des Spiels in Bezug auf Winnicott und Huizinga ergänzen die Ideen von Sartre. Die Bedeutung einen Raum für « Existenzangst » offen zu halten, wenn der oder die KlientIn vom Geist der Schwere zum Geist des Spiels herüber bewegt, wird betont. Kurze Beispiele von Klienten Notizen und Demonstrationsvideos ergänzen das theoretische Material.

Schlüsselwörter: Geist der Schwere, Geist des Spiels, das Nichts, Freiheit, Existenzangst, Nachdenklich

Dans l'Esprit du Jeu: la Psychothérapie Existentielle Appliquée

Résumé: Cet article discute de la Psychothérapie Existentielle Appliquée (PEA), une approche thérapeutique fondée par Betty Cannon et prenant ses racines dans la philosophie de Jean-Paul Sartre. La PEA est une synthèse de perceptions existentielles et psychanalytiques avec des interventions tirées de la Gestalt thérapie, de la psychothérapie orientée sur le corps, et d'autres approches expérientielles. Les interventions sont censées être « joueuses » et faciliter le mouvement de ce que Sartre appelle « l'esprit du sérieux » vers ce que les auteurs ont nommé « l'esprit du jeu » - c'est-à-dire, d'un point de vue qui renie la liberté et la responsabilité vers un qui reconnaît et valide la liberté de soi-même et des autres. Des discussions sur le jeu, tiré de Winnicott et Huizinga, augmentent les idées de Sartre. L'importance de tenir un espace pour « l'anxiété existentielle » pendant qu'un client se déplace de l'esprit du sérieux vers l'esprit du jeu est soulignée. De brefs exemples tirés de notes de dossiers clients et des vidéos de démonstration constituent le matériel théorique.

Mots clés: esprit du sérieux, esprit du jeu, néant, liberté, anxiété existentielle, pré-réflexive

Дух игры: прикладная экзистенциальная психотерапия

Резюме: В статье обсуждается Прикладная Экзистенциальная Психотерапия (Applied Existential Psychotherapy - AEP), терапевтический подход, основанный Бетти Кэннон на базе философии Жана-Поля Сартра. АЕР является синтезом экзистенциальных и психоаналитических наработок и заимствованных из гештальт-терапии, телесной терапии и других эмпирических подходов интервенций. Интервенции предполагают 'игру' и призваны содействовать движению от того, что Сартр называл 'духом серьезности' к тому, что автор называет 'духом игры', т.е. от представлений, которые препятствуют свободе и ответственности, к позиции, в которой признается и ценится собственная свобода человека и свобода других людей. Идеи Сартра подкрепляются взглядами на игру Винникотта и Хейзинга. При переходе клиента от духа серьезности к духу игры подчеркивается важность удержания пространства для 'экзистенциальной тревоги'. Теоретический материал дополняется короткими записями клиентов и демонстрацией видео.

Ключевые слова: дух серьезности, дух игры, ничто, свобода, экзистенциальная тревога, до-рефлексивный

When Sartre (1972) wrote in *Being and Nothingness* that the 'principal result of existential psychoanalysis must be to make us repudiate the *spirit of seriousness*' (p. 796), he was implying that the aim of therapy is to facilitate an attitude toward life that embraces openness and possibility. The 'spirit of seriousness' is a life stance in which we view ourselves as determined by forces outside (or inside) ourselves. It is a perspective that provokes us to claim that our spouse, our boss, our past, our unconscious, our nature, our biology, our socio-material or other circumstances have caused us to do or be as we are. Motivated by the understandable desire for stability and certainty, the spirit of seriousness also permeates deterministic psychology from Freud to the present. Sartre considers this 'bad faith' since it denies one pole of human reality, 'freedom', while overemphasising the other, 'facticity' (or the conditions of our lives). These two poles are actually intertwined: There is no freedom without world-engagement, and no world that does not present itself as 'appearing' to an embodied consciousness.

According to Sartre (1972), *play* is the most obvious activity in which 'a man apprehends himself as free and wishes to use his freedom' (p. 741). Elaborating on this idea, we have introduced a term, the 'spirit of play', as a counterbalance to the spirit of seriousness. The spirit of play allows us to embrace the circumstances of our lives without being swallowed up by them. It gives us the space in which to recognise our freedom. The spirit of play is not so much a way of thinking as a way of experiencing. It is a lived encounter with the lightness of being. This does not mean that we escape from painful emotions or life situations, but that we approach them with a sense of agency – with the capacity to see possibilities and engage in opportunities. By moving from the spirit of seriousness to the spirit of play, we come to live more creative spontaneous lives. In a contemporary world characterised by a staggering amount of change and uncertainty, the spirit of play may help us to meet these challenges with curiosity and openness rather than terror and overwhelm. Psychotherapy itself, from this perspective, becomes a form of play. Or, as British object-relations theorist D.W. Winnicott (1971) says, 'Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together' (p. 38). If one of them (hopefully the client) is unable to play, then the two must learn to play together.

Over the past thirty-five years, we have developed a theoretical and practical approach to therapy grounded in the philosophy of Sartre. We call it 'Applied Existential Psychotherapy' (AEP). It is a synthesis of existential and (classical and contemporary) psychoanalytic insights with interventions drawn from Gestalt therapy, body-oriented psychotherapy, and other experiential approaches. Like the early existential analysts, Binswanger and Boss, and also like Sartre, we very much value psychoanalysis for contributing an understanding of the importance of childhood as the place where our ways of being in the world were first formed. Our interventions, however, are likely to be more body-oriented and experiential/experimental than interpretative. Adapted from Gestalt therapy and other experiential approaches, they allow us to more fully explore the importance of what existential philosophy refers to as the 'lived body' and 'pre-reflective' (gut-level) experience. They also help us to focus intently on the present moment while exploring the past as it impacts the present and the future as it gives meaning to it.

In creating a therapy drawn from a number of sources, we are acutely aware of possibilities for cross-fertilisation and dialogue among approaches. At the same time, like existential therapy in general, AEP poses a major challenge to some fundamental assumptions of 'scientific' psychology, specifically subject/object dualism, mechanistic determinism, and the need for maintaining objectivity. We insist instead on the radical freedom of the individual in context, and the intertwining of self and world. Hence, while not discounting the influences of heredity or environment, we consider scientific determinism to be a matter of bad faith – one that if fully embraced leads to a victim mentality, to a position of 'it [my past, my unconscious, my circumstances] does me' rather than 'I do it'.

In taking a 'post-Cartesian' position on the subject/object dichotomy, AEP practitioners are in line with the thinking of many contemporary relational and intersubjective psychoanalysts, who cite Heidegger and his most famous pupil, Hans-Georg Gadamer, along with a number of postmodern theorists. Again like these analysts, we reject Freudian drive theory in favour of an intersubjective approach that takes note of the impact of the therapy on the therapist as well as the client. Perhaps the seemingly unlikely convergence of contemporary existential and psychoanalytic thinking on these matters indicates the need for further debate about the very premises on which therapy is (or ought to be) based. This, of course, is a very large topic and one that invites much discussion.

For our purposes here, we might summarise the direction of our particular synthesis, which we realise is one among many existential approaches, in this way: Practitioners of AEP focus on experiencing the present moment – in all of its bodily-lived fullness and immediacy – as the primary avenue to change. At the same time, we take into account the past (as ground) and the future (as giving meaning to contemporary dilemmas). Interventions are intended to be playful and to facilitate movement from the spirit of seriousness to the spirit of play.

Psychotherapy as Play

What then is play, and how does it become a basis for therapy? Many writers on play, including Sartre (1972), define play as 'gratuitous' activity (p. 740). Johan Huizinga (1950), in his seminal work *Homo Ludens*, gives a definition that is strikingly similar to Sartre's. He says that play is 'a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious" but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly' (p. 13). Calling play 'gratuitous' means that it is activity not called for by circumstances – lying outside the chain of practical causality. It might be useful in the long run because it encourages creativity and allows us to try on new ways of acting and being. But, in terms of daily life, it has no practical goal. Play points us toward freedom because it is the activity in which we are least absorbed in the 'serious' world – and least convinced that we are pawns of circumstances.

Sartre (1972) calls for a 'special study' of play as an antidote to the 'serious' attitude that is heavy with awareness of the limitations and demands of the bio-socio-material world. He says that play 'releases subjectivity' (p. 742) because it acquaints us with the 'nothingness' that differentiates embodied consciousness from mere objects in the world. It is this '*no-thingness*', our own existence as a vantage point on being that may shift and change, that is the source of our freedom. Because play has no practical goals, it releases us from the exigencies of the given. Similarly Winnicott (1971) thinks that play opens up the 'intermediate space' between the subjective and objective worlds so that we can come to feel more 'real' and 'alive' and to live more creatively and authentically (pp. 104-110).

How might a playful psychotherapy look? First of all, there are no established protocols delimiting 'playful psychotherapy'. It is 'gratuitous' in the sense of lacking a practical agenda. It is flexible, spontaneous, and improvisational. It leaves room for an 'area of formlessness' that provides space for recovering the capacity to play and the 'freedom to choose' (Winnicott, 1971, pp. 33-37). Playful psychotherapy is the container for surprise: the end cannot be fully known. Since play often involves physical movement, it engages the body as well as the mind. While sensitive to human suffering, there is room for laughter, humour, and the pleasure of creating. Playful psychotherapy provides a space for trying on new possibilities. It is transformative, allowing us to see new meanings and discover different ways to experience reality.

According to Huizinga (1950), play requires a special space, a 'magic circle'. In psychotherapy, that space may be suggested by the ritual of going to the therapist's office or other therapeutic milieu. Yet, when we talk about therapeutic space, we are not merely talking about the set-up of the office, though items in the venue (such as the couch in psychoanalysis or the empty chair in Gestalt therapy) may be part of creating a space 'outside of ordinary life' (p. 13). In AEP, we minimally require a third chair, some pillows, and enough space to move around. Yet creating the magic circle requires more than a physical set-up. It requires playful interventions and a therapist who knows how to use those interventions to open up the space for therapeutic play.

Sartre (1972) says that existential psychoanalysis must be 'completely flexible' and adjust itself to 'the slightest changes in the subject'. It must also recognise that different approaches may be suitable for different analysands, or for the same analysand at a different time in therapy (p. 731). Likewise, AEP interventions, drawing from a large repertoire of possibilities, are carefully adapted to particular clients at particular moments in therapy. Rather than setting agendas, we invite clients simply to be aware of what is going on in the moment and to put words to that shifting awareness. This doesn't mean that we don't use interventions that invite deepening or help stabilise a client when severe trauma emerges, but rather that we do not attempt to guide or control the direction of the therapy. We trust instead that what emerges at this particular moment is what needs to emerge.

This includes bodily-lived experience, as well as thoughts, feelings, and fantasies. Exploring the body is important to therapy since it provides the foundation for prereflective experience. Such experience, easily distorted by verbalisation, is nonetheless the place where gut-level choices are made. Attending to the body also allows us to work with trauma, since trauma is so seldom fully accessible to purely verbal interventions. To facilitate attention to bodily-lived experience, we invite clients to pay attention to voice, stance, posture, gait, facial expression, eye contact, movement, and breath. Remembering Sartre's idea (1972) that 'a gesture refers to a *Weltanschauung* [Worldview] and we sense it' (p. 589), we may explore the meaning of that gesture (or other physical position or movement) by inviting the client to exaggerate it, curtail it for the moment, complete it, or 'try on' its opposite. We often note discrepancies between what a client is saying in words and what the client's body seems to be 'saying'. We invite non-verbal, as well as verbal, expression – encouraging clients to sing, dance, draw, move, make music, or express themselves in nonsense syllables. Or we may suggest that a client 'physicalise' a metaphor. For example: 'Stand up and try "standing your ground"'. Such interventions are introduced as collaborative experiments: they are ways of playing together, rather than tasks leading to a known outcome.

We also pay attention to our own part in the non-verbal play of therapy. In practice sessions, AEP students are taught to mirror not only the words, but also the body language of their practice partner in order to get a feel for the other person's lived experience. We are aware that modulating our voice tone, allowing our body stance to show empathic resonance, making eye contact or looking away, and other ways of interacting non-verbally strongly influence the therapy. Exploring the non-verbal leads to a deeper understanding of how underlying issues (in both therapist and client) are impacting the relationship. For example, a woman client avoids eye contact, pulls back in her chair, and closes down each time her therapist leans forward. This develops into a repetitive pattern in which the therapist pursues and the client retreats, evoking material from the past for both. In the terminology of relational psychoanalyst Philip Bromberg (2006, 2011), their interaction becomes a kind of therapeutic 'enactment'. Elucidated and negotiated, this becomes a vehicle for movement in the therapy.

In addition to directly exploring the impact of the past on the therapeutic relationship, there is another technique that we frequently use to work with underlying issues – a modified version of Gestalt 'empty chair' dialogues. We use empty chair dialogues to explore dreams as well as interpersonal and intra-psychic conflicts. These dialogues help to resolve issues deriving from childhood, allowing clients to rework their earliest 'choices' of ways of being in the world. Change ensues as they become aware that what *was* no longer *is* – or needs to be. We almost never use these dialogues as practice for real world encounters. They are instead 'plays' or fictional dialogues designed to help us 'play' with the conditions of life. They are phenomena in the magic circle.

As underlying material is explored and clarified, client and therapist come to encounter each other more authentically in the present. For this to happen, the therapist as well as the client must be available for a genuine meeting in which 'each person takes his chances and assumes his responsibilities' (Sartre, 1974, p. 201). The therapist too must be open and vulnerable. If two people are going to play together, both must be willing to play. In such a therapeutic context, clients may more willingly open themselves to the possibility of altering their ways of being in the world and with others.

Moments of Radical Change: Moving Toward the Spirit of Play

Sartre (1972) calls the moments when radical change occurs psychological 'instants' – noting that they provide the 'clearest and most moving image of our freedom' (p. 612). They are moments of 'double nothingness' (p. 600) where our old way of being in the world starts to fade and a new way (existing only in outline) begins to emerge. Such moments are frequently accompanied by existential anxiety – in this case, anxiety about lack of solidity and predictability either in ourselves or those around us.

Existential anxiety increases as clients approach the moment of radical change. They often describe themselves as 'standing on the edge of the abyss', 'losing the ground beneath my feet', or 'not knowing myself'. They claim that they feel 'strange' or 'odd' and that the world around them feels 'unfamiliar'. Bill, a student in a demonstration videotape, says he feels 'weird', 'like somebody different', 'like I'm not the same person, like there's 'something different about my body' (Cannon, 2009, p. 204). He is a bit unnerved. If the therapist also becomes unnerved, mistaking existential anxiety for neurotic anxiety or (worse yet) for psychosis, the therapist may try to stop the process.

On the other hand, if therapists are able to support and stay with their clients (perhaps allowing their own perspective to shift), something new may emerge. At this point, clients are likely to use words such as 'light', 'playful', 'new', 'expansive', and 'open' to describe their experience. Metaphors of creative potential may emerge. Diane, another student in a demonstration video, says she feels 'like a fresh piece of clay or an empty canvas or a blank page in the typewriter' (Cannon, 2011, p. 164). Laughter frequently accompanies such moments.

In experiencing the psychological instant, we look into the abyss and face the 'nothingness' that consciousness *is*. This, however, is not quite enough. If we are to repudiate the spirit of seriousness and embrace the spirit of play, we must take another step. We must take freedom itself, our own and that of others, as a value. Rather than exchanging one substantial self for a different 'better' one, we accept that we have no substantial self at all.

Hence the aim of AEP is not to build a better 'ego', but to dissolve the seeming solidity that gets in the way of spontaneity and openness. The ego, for Sartre, is not a psychic structure or seat of reality orientation, as it is for Freud. It is instead an object created by 'impure reflection' impelled by the desire to be a solid something or someone. Sartre (1960) says that its essential function may be 'to mask from consciousness its very spontaneity' (p. 100). It is this spontaneity we seek to recover in therapy. It is only by letting go of the urge to solidify the self that we are able to open up what Heidegger (1962) calls the 'play-space' or 'elbow-room' (*spielraum*) necessary for refashioning our way of being in the world.

While it is probably not possible (or even desirable) to live entirely without an ego (Barnes, 1991), it is possible to hold the story that we tell ourselves about ourselves lightly rather than heavily. It is possible to make room for our experiencing selves. Sartre (1972) says that we do this by taking a certain kind of reflective attitude, 'purifying reflection' (p. 273

& 742). It is a form of reflection in which we stop trying to create an inherently impossible fixed self and attend instead to our unfolding, fluid, and changing experience. Although this is never achieved once and for all – the temptation to stasis being ever present – it is possible to approach ourselves and each other more rather than less often in this way.

Hence we may come to accept that we are not a static entity, but a self in the making – and that all people have this same fluidity. We may learn to live more gracefully with uncertainty, surprises, and lack of ultimate reliability. The reward is a more flexible, spontaneous, and open way of living, seizing opportunities, and finding new solutions to old problems. The price is giving up that impossible dream of security. Neither the world nor ourselves are ultimately reliable in the sense of being stable and unchanging. Nor perhaps would we want them to be.

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