

EXISTENTIALISM AND PSYCHIATRY COMMENT ON THE ARTICLE BY FRANK FISH

By

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FRANK FISH's paper, published in *The Journal of Mental Science* in September 1961, pp. 978–985, deals with issues which are fundamental for psychiatry. He examines the different approaches used in existential psychology and especially the philosophical basis of existential psychiatry. In his conclusion, he denies its value. His paper demands a reply, since it contains misrepresentations.

PHENOMENOLOGY THE BASIS OF UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOLOGY

Fish fails to understand existential psychiatry because he has failed to grasp the underlying philosophy. Although he accepts "understanding" psychology, he sees in it merely something "simple", feeling ourselves into a situation, understanding somebody's anger for instance.

"Understanding" psychology goes in fact much further. It becomes fruitful in connection with phenomenology. The latter is concerned with what is given in consciousness, with the subject's world of experience. This is reached through intuition.

The fact that Fish has not grasped the significance of this method is shown by his criticism of Binswanger's phenomenological account of Love. He quotes Binswanger as saying, "the loved one exists as a Thou for the loving one and therefore exists after his death". Fish's objection to this is: "the image disappears when the loving co-existent dies or even dement". Has he really never met patients and other people who are trying to cope with images of people long after their death? Has he never come across a person who cannot come to terms with the late father's or mother's image?

It is true that Husserl claimed that he could establish an eidetic psychology, an *a priori* science, independent of experience. Neither Jaspers nor Binswanger followed him in that. They showed how a phenomenological approach can be used to enter into the world of our patients. Fish in his paper quotes Binswanger's phenomenological understanding of the schizophrenic.

To him, such a description is without value. I have found these accounts and those dealing with other diseases such as manic-depressive illness, obsessional-compulsive illness, and sexual perversions (von Gebsattel, Minkowski, Laing and others) very helpful. The classical scientific conceptual approach, based on diagnostic classification, recommended by Fish, does not yield such understanding.

ONTOLOGY AND EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHIES AS EXTENSIONS OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

As F. Heinemann has pointed out, Husserl's approach opens two possibilities for developing this philosophy: (1) leading to a subjective philosophy, based on the experiencing ego, which is existential philosophy; and (2) an objective philosophy dealing with Being, an ontology (1). Both fields merge as Being is approached from the angle of human existence.

Fish's paper contains quotations from Heidegger's philosophy of Being. They show Heidegger's deep concern about dread, anxiety and care, characteristic of the mood of our time. Fish quotes his questions "Who am I?", "What am I doing here?" and his account of man's disgust at an inauthentic existence. The mention of these ideas should be sufficient to arouse a psychiatrist's interest; for our patients raise these issues; and they break down through being unable to find an answer to them (Frankl's "nosogenic" neuroses).

Fish mentions Binswanger's ontology and his stress on Love as an opposite to Heidegger's Care. This is called "a gross distortion of Heidegger's view". I should rather say that Binswanger has added the hopeful aspect of life and has thus corrected a one-sided philosophy.

The common element in all existential philosophies lies in the assertion of the freedom of the individual and of his responsibility. This is in opposition to the determinism of the scientific explanatory approach (also mentioned in Fish's paper) which erects a system by means of scientific concepts and aims at establishing causal relationships.

The existential approach is of fundamental importance for psychiatrists, as it asserts man's ability to act in spite of adverse circumstances and heredity. Life and illness become a challenge, to be met.

Heidegger's philosophy includes the existential question of authenticity, as Fish has stated. We meet many patients whose breakdowns are caused by forces which prevent their reaching a measure of authenticity, acceptable to them, by the interference of dominating mothers, fathers, husbands, wives and other people. Heidegger had further stressed the adverse effects of impersonal forces on authenticity which is characteristic of modern organized society. Many people break down under the pressure of these forces, unsuccessfully trying to establish their selves in monotonous jobs.

THE VALIDITY OF ONTOLOGIES AND EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHIES

Fish questions the validity of Heidegger's ontological and existential views. He criticizes "the whole system" because of its "lack of an adequate method of testing the results". Such tests are required in scientific experiments and investigations. There is a vital difference however, between scientific and philosophical truth, which Fish has not taken into consideration.

Existential philosophers differ amongst themselves in their claims with regard to ontological statements. Heidegger maintains that such statements represent knowledge. Certain psychiatrists have accepted this claim and have built systems of psychopathology on this basis (for instance M. Boss). Such an approach leads to sectarianism and the erection of cults. As had already been pointed out, Binswanger's account of Being differs from Heidegger's. The acceptance of any cult is foreign to modern medicine.

There is, however, another interpretation of an ontology. Fish has quoted Karl Jaspers' rejection of existential psychiatry as "a philosophical error". He did not, however, quote Jaspers' positive views on the subject.

They are of great importance for psychiatrists. Ontology becomes "a method of illumination by providing a mirror, an appeal which enters into the freedom (of the individual)" (2). By the attempt at illumination, we express our faith in man's potentialities. This, according to Jaspers, constitutes philosophical faith (4). Philosophical truth is based on faith.

Jaspers formulates the difference between philosophical and scientific truth as follows: "Formulable faith contents must not be treated like universally

true propositions; the absolute awareness of truth in faith is something fundamentally different from the comprehension of the universal validity of scientifically true propositions, which are always particular”(5). Jaspers has pointed out that “thought which leads to an illumination of existence depends on understanding psychology and is itself a stimulus towards developing an understanding psychology” (3).

CONCLUSION

The paper by Fish “Existentialism and Psychiatry” depicting existentialistic philosophy as worthless for psychiatry is misleading. It is hoped that British psychiatrists will not be deterred from exploring the possibilities of this approach and from following their colleagues in Switzerland, Austria, France, Germany and America.

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3. *Idem. ibid.*, p. 648.
4. *Idem* (1949). *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*. New York: Philosophical Library, p. 74.
5. *Idem, ibid.*, p. 91.

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