Existential phenomenology: 'I am'

The second major branch of phenomenology is existential phenomenology, more commonly known as existentialism. Developed from Husserl's work by his assistant, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), existential phenomenology holds greater clinical relevance in gestalt therapy. Whereas Husserl focused on the essence of being human Heidegger focused on existence, believing that existence precedes essence. From an existential viewpoint Descartes' assertion, 'I think therefore I am' just had the words in the wrong order - I am therefore I think. A concise description of existential phenomenology is given by Merleau-Ponty who describes it as, 'a study of the advent of being to consciousness, instead of presuming its possibility as given in advance.' (1962: 61).

Heidegger saw human existence as being tied inseparably to the world. Consequently he did not believe that our existence could be bracketed. Anyone reading Heidegger will come across the German term Dasein, and he asserted that 'a human being is a Dasein' (Spinelli, 1989: 108), meaning 'being-in-the-world' – this is hyphenated to show the connectedness of our being and the world. The fit with gestalt is again evident in Heidegger's views on seeing our awareness and existence as intersubjective. He saw us as being thrown into an uncertain existence that led to death and considered that in order to manage the overwhelming angst and dread aroused by this existential given, we chose to defend against this truth through living inauthentically. The effect of living this way is a deadening of our vitality and individuality through rule-bound limitations. Conversely, if we live authentically we acknowledge our sense of agency and responsibility in our lives.

Gestalt therapy seeks to heighten awareness so that the client can choose whether to live authentically or inauthentically. With existentialism key to the stance of the gestalt therapist, we seek to increase freedom of choice. By this I do not mean that we can always choose the events that happen to us, but we do choose our reaction to the event and the meaning we give to it. A colloquial example of such choice half empty in a given:

Owing our freedom this does bring its problems, and if we make it is constructed the Bible, the Koran, in existentialism holds that order to live authentically.

Existential phenomenology and the world and as such the client's process of gestalt therapists. Ex. inquiry into my dial with me. From an existential point of view with the meanings that No one can experience spaces. Although 1 isolation. Awareness to nothingness as well as the uncertainty of being angst, if we accept the nothingness of our empty existence is to live inauthentically.

I am painting a picture from this brief account of being-in-the-world, authentically! However it still requires us to some extent of reality that in general or less valid than that.
example of such choice is whether we see the glass as half full or half empty in a given situation.

Owning our freedom of choice means living authentically and this does bring its problems in that we cannot presuppose any outcome or belief, including that life has meaning. The meaning we make is constructed by us. Whether we search for meaning in the Bible, the Koran, philosophy or the Sunday supplement, existentialism holds that ultimately our existence is meaningless. In order to live authentically, to be, we must accept the uncertainty of existence.

Existential phenomenology is the phenomenology of being-in-the-world and as such defines existence as relational. It is precisely the client’s process of relating with the world that is of interest to gestalt therapists. Existential phenomenology is an instrument of inquiry into my dialogue with the world and my world’s dialogue with me. From an existential perspective we are ultimately alone with the meanings that we give to our experience and to things. No one can experience what we experience in our separate life-spaces. Although I need others to exist, in this sense I exist in isolation. Awareness of meaninglessness, Heidegger argues, leads to nothingness as we recognize our temporary existence with the only certainty being death. Along with such uncertainty comes angst, if we accept our freedom of choice, responsibility, the meaninglessness of our existence and our ultimate isolation. To live authentically means facing these existential issues, the alternative is to live inauthentically.

I am painting a bleak picture of our existence. Quite frankly, from this brief account of existential phenomenology and our being-in-the-world, I think that I might sooner live my life inauthentically! However, paradoxically in our separateness there is togetherness. We are all in the same boat and although we may all have a different experience of that boat, through dialogue we can experience something of the other’s perception and their being-in-the-world. Our respective realities and perceptions are co-created within our intersubjective dance with the world and no one’s view of reality is any more real than anyone else’s. It follows therefore that in gestalt therapy the therapist’s reality is no more or less valid than the client’s.