

How My Interest in Existential Psychology Led Me to Paul Wong

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Abstract

My interest in existential psychology dates back to my undergraduate years at the University of Wisconsin and my graduate work at Northwestern University. The books and articles I read in those days resonated with me and my personal experiences, affirming that existence predates essence. My personal contacts with Rollo May, Viktor Frankl, and others in the field helped me to fathom the importance of this outlook to psychology and psychotherapy. When I met Paul Wong, I knew that he was an exemplar who made several unique contributions to existential psychology and psychotherapy, namely, his Christian perspective, his *Yin/Yang* dialectic, and his “Second Wave Positive psychology.”

Gordon Allport

I first heard about existential philosophy when I was an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and took two years of Portuguese from Dr. Alberto Rosa, one of my favorite professors. After covering the basic structure of the language, he had us read such Brazilian classics as *Dom Casmurro* in the original Portuguese. Every Friday he arranged a *feira* or celebration, replete with Brazilian and Portuguese snacks, as well as Portuguese songs. He also gave philosophy lessons in Portuguese, and I recall him comparing philosophers with people who had been given a large mound of beans. It would be impossible for them to consume all the beans, so they needed to be selective, and that is what happens when philosophers present their way of understanding the world. It was Professor Rosa who introduced me to existentialism, a philosophical perspective that he found especially appealing and one that subsequently had a major influence on my own life. I liked its emphasis upon freedom of choice and its insistence that “existence precedes essence.” Rather than focusing on innate “ideals” and “forms,” most existentialists deny that humans have inborn identities. Instead, they insist, humans create their own identities and forge values that provide meaning to their lives. I often refer to this as the “backpack” model of identity, since the backpack symbolizes how one’s genetic and cultural possibilities set the stage, and one’s limitations set the boundaries, for future behaviors, as contrasted with the “seed” model postulating an innate identity that flourishes or ossifies as a result of one’s milieu.

When I took a course on Greek philosophy, I was especially struck by the work of Heraclitus, who famously advised, “You can never step into the same river twice,” noting that the river keeps changing, as does the person who steps into the river, as well as the location of the activity. This perspective holds that people are in a process of **becoming**, not simply in a

static **being**; one can find this point of view eloquently stated by Gordon Allport in his 1955 book, *Becoming*. Years later, I met Allport in a discussion session on existentialism, where he spoke of how this viewpoint would leave a “residue” that could be employed by more established psychological schools of thought. Allport’s co-authored measurement of values was one of the first personality tests I had learned how to administer at Northwestern University. Moreover, having worked with children with special needs in Richmond, Virginia, I was also familiar with his work on prejudice, having done my best to undercut racial discrimination in the classes where I taught, helping integrate the public school speech and hearing clinic long before regular classrooms were desegregated.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Although I read a number of articles about existentialism, I never worked my way through an entire book until I arrived at Northwestern University for doctoral studies in educational psychology. One of my classmates, William Mount, who shared my interest in existentialism, loaned me the book, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, by Jean-Paul Sartre (1946), which I started to read on January 1, 1959 – what a way to begin the new year! This book is based on a lecture Sartre delivered at the end of the Second World War; by *humanism*, Sartre meant that human existence comes before any hypothetical “essence,” especially one dictated by cultural constraints or organized religion. Sartre emphasized the freely willed choices that people can make, choices that reflect their convictions about human nature. For Sartre, choice was destiny.

Moreover, Sartre postulated that there is no meaning in life aside from what individuals bring to it, although people have more options than they may realize. Sartre and other writers have noted that existentialism focuses on specific people and contexts. It is always **MY**

existence, **YOUR** existence, **THEIR** existence, in a particular time and place. One's "being-in-the-world" is culturally situated, something that therapists need to take into account. Therapists would also benefit from studying the writings of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the ambiguities of human existence and why these ambiguities make choice a necessity; one is forced to choose. (His 1968 book, *The Visible and the Invisible*, was published by my alma mater, Northwestern University.)

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844/1900), a German philosopher, had taken the position that there are no absolute values; thus it is incumbent on all people to create their own. When Nietzsche famously wrote, "God is dead," he was stating that people could not resort to supernatural entities to support their notion of values; instead, they were "condemned to freedom," to use Sartre's phrase. Nietzsche used the term "God is dead" to reflect his belief that, when people no longer need to believe in God, the concept will no longer be useful.

Existential thought is often traced back to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who, in turn, was influenced by St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Kierkegaard is often considered the founder of *Christian existentialism*, a perspective shared by the French novelist Albert Camus and the American theologian Paul Tillich. Rollo May credited his own existential approach to Kierkegaard as well as to Alfred Adler and Paul Tillich. In 1965, I attended a lecture by Tillich at the University of Chicago and began to read his 1952 book, *The Courage to Be*, which describes the experience of being encapsulated by Being itself. For Tillich, God is not a being, God is the "Ground of Being," and everything occurs within this "Ground." Tillich, often called a "Christian existentialist," felt that his concept of God was the exemplar of both existence and essence.

Rollo May

In 1975, Rollo May published *The Courage to Create*, which extends Tillich's perspective to acts of creativity. Having long immersed himself in the writings of European existentialists, in 1958 May and two co-editors published *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology*, taking the position that all people are responsible for creating purpose and meaning in their own lives. I read the book a few years before the 1959 convention of the American Psychological Association in Cincinnati, where I attended a panel discussion on the topic, during which Rollo May, Gordon Allport, and other psychologists discussed this "new dimension." The 1959 APA convention was memorable also for other presentations, such as those by Albert Ellis, S. I. Hayakawa, Gardner Murphy, and Carl Rogers, with all of whom I was to develop rewarding friendships. Forty years later, I was flattered when the *Review of Existential Psychology & Psychiatry* asked me to write an overview of Rollo May's legacy (Krippner, 1999), and in 1991 the *Association for Humanistic Psychology Newsletter* published my review of his evocative book, *The Cry for Myth* (Krippner, 1991).

Harry Easton, whom I had met in 1961 when the American Psychological Association convened in St. Louis, Missouri, where he worked with deaf clients at a Jewish community center, shared my interest in existentialism. Harry and I subsequently wrote a paper applying existential principles to disabilities, which was published in a 1964 issue of the *Personnel and Guidance Journal* (Easton & Krippner, 1964). We applied existential postulates to working with deaf and hard-of-hearing clients, addressing their need to make choices that would foster their well-being and positive functioning. In 1972, Harry and I followed this up with a second article, "Deafness: An Existential Interpretation," published in the *American Annals of the Deaf* (Krippner & Easton, 1972). In 1965 I had applied my understanding of existential psychology to my work with students having reading disabilities, with whom I had been working at the Kent

State University Child Study Center, culminating in an article that was published in the *Review of Existential Psychology* (Krippner, 1965). All these articles advocated an acceptance of people with these challenges, as well as an exploration of their options, keeping in mind Sartre's statement that people have more options than they might realize.

All of these articles demonstrate how existential thought can be applied to many of the problems faced by rehabilitation psychologists working with disabled clients. The existentially oriented psychologist would encourage patients to reject societal interpretations of their disability; moreover, this psychologist would not hesitate to involve himself personally in the patients' struggle for self-direction, fostering an "I-Thou" relationship with them. This psychologist also would encourage clients to transcend their personal suffering and to find meaning in their anxiety and anguish. The rehabilitation program is seen as being most effective when the emphasis is placed upon the clients' "existence" rather than their "essence."

Viktor Frankl

In 1971, I was named program chair for an international conference on Humanistic Psychology to be held in Wurzburg, West Germany. I had invited both Rollo May and Albert Ellis to give major addresses, and both accepted. I was pleasantly surprised when the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl agreed to discuss "logotherapy" with our group. His psychotherapeutic approach emphasized free will, the discovery of meaning, and other concepts that became lynchpins for existential, humanistic, and positive psychology.

Frankl devised logotherapy during his time in three Nazi concentration camps, and I had been profoundly moved by his writings on his experiences and how his attribution of meaning to those horrific years had impelled his therapeutic approach. During my dinner with Viktor Frankl, when the topic turned to alcoholism, I mentioned that all the alcoholics and drug addicts I knew

had been searching for meaning and were enduring spiritual crises. Much to my surprise, Frankl (1946/2006) later quoted me on page 144 of his revised book, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

On a later trip to Vienna, I visited the offices of the Viktor Frankl Foundation and received a warm welcome, as the staff was familiar with that citation. In its various editions, the book sold several million copies. Even so, the praise was not unanimous, with some critics doubting Frankl's description of how death camp prisoners moved from shock to resignation to depersonalization.

The Epicureans

If one reads the philosophical literature carefully, one can find precursors of existentialism in various ancient speculations. Perhaps this is most evident in the work of Epicurus, the Roman philosopher who counseled that the fear of divine punishment is the main cause of human anxiety. Epicurean philosophy imploded that concept, stating that there were no gods; moreover, even if there were, they would not take an interest in human concerns. Two centuries later, an Epicurean, the Roman philosopher Lucretius, authored his epic poem, *De Rerum Natura (On the Nature of Things)*, in which he integrated this dictum into a theory that bypassed divine judgment and emphasized human relationships. Some readers of Lucretius's poem see it as a forerunner of humanistic thought and chaos theory, in addition to existentialism, given its denial of any intrinsic life purpose. But Lucretius urged his readers to bring their own meaning to their lives, one that would ensure their happiness, creating their own description of "the way things are."

Lucretius asserted that the fear of death is a major human concern and attempted to undermine that fear (Hutchings, 1952). Irvin Yalom (1980) and other writers have described the major themes of existentialism as freedom, meaning, isolation, and death. Terror Management Theory (TMT) touches on all these themes, with a special emphasis on the fear of death. TMT holds

that people are caught in constant tension, resulting from their need to survive in the face of the inevitability of their passing. TMT builds upon earlier writings of Ernest Becker, Søren Kierkegaard, and Otto Rank, all of whom wrote about this tension, as well as how it could be treated, especially in psychotherapy (Solomon et al., 2015).

Free Will?

When I first heard a presentation by Sheldon Solomon at an annual convention of the American Psychological Association, it was like an epiphany. It all made a great deal of sense to me, so I invited him to write a chapter for a book I was co-editing, *The Psychological Impact of War Trauma on Civilians* (Krippner & McIntyre, 2003). His co-authored chapter asserts that the management of terror was the underlying factor in the ethnic killings in Afghanistan, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, the massacre of Tutsi tribal members in Rwanda, and the rape of Muslim woman in the Serbian-Bosnian conflict, one marked by soccer games in which Serbs used the heads of Bosnian children instead of balls. TMT theorists have conducted numerous experiments in which people were interviewed in cemeteries or other sites associated with death, even though the topic was not mentioned. These experiments indicate that unconscious motives can have real-life consequences and that omnipresent existential concerns can impact behavior. Different people manage terror in different ways. The journalist Sebastian Junger (2023) recalled his coverage of the conflict in Bosnia and how, when fighting for a cause, one seems to make oneself “immortal.”

In the 1980s, Benjamin Libet and his associates (1983) conducted a series of experiments on “readiness potential,” the brain’s preparation to perform a motor act, one that is preceded by about half a second of neurological activity. Some people thought that these experiments negated the notion of “free will” championed by existentialists. However, the experiments focused on the precursors of small muscle movements, rather than on large motor behavior. Nor did they focus on

complex cognitions, such as a way to resolve a paradox, which Kirk Schneider (2023), a leading existential psychotherapist, suggests sets humans apart from mechanized models of human functioning.

Kirk Schneider and I worked together on several projects and wrote a review of Len Bergantino's incisive book, *The Existential Moment*, for the *Association for Humanistic Psychology Newsletter* (Krippner & Schneider, 1982). In 1995, Schneider and May co-authored what I consider to be the definitive text on the topic, *The Psychology of Existence: An Integrative, Clinical Perspective* (Schneider & May, 1997). Their book provides its readers with a history of existential psychotherapy, an overview of its current status and future directions, and proposed clinical applications, including how other interventions can be integrated into an overall existential approach.

William James famously said that he chose to believe in free will. He did not see how the issue could be settled scientifically but noted that there are advantages to that option, such as holding people responsible for their actions and their consequences. When Sartre wrote that human beings are "condemned to freedom," he was both supporting the stance of free will and pointing out the responsibilities it entails. Nietzsche cautioned people not to overly emphasize the notion of free will, because it might lead to a surfeit of pride, and serve as an excuse to punish offenders because they need to take responsibility for their actions.

Theistic Existentialists

Paul Wong is revered as one of several "theistic existentialists," having had a successful career as a pastor earlier in his life. He advocated facing adversity with humility as well as cultivating contemplation, meditation, and prayer, and fostering an intimate connection with Jesus Christ. Gabriel Marcel (2002), a French philosopher and playwright who converted to

Roman Catholicism early in his career, is often called a “Christian existentialist,” although he disliked the term, preferring to write about “the philosophy of existence.”

I was sympathetic with “theistic existentialism,” because I played an active role in the First Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin, when I was a student at the nearby university. The Society’s church had been designed by the famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who was once asked if he was a theist. He replied, “Of course I believe in God, but I spell it Nature.” I heard similar sentiments when I attended meetings of the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, another religious group with which I feel a concordance. Paul’s faith was never narrow-minded; for example, he often went to Taiwan to give presentations to various Buddhist groups. Søren Kierkegaard was probably the first “theistic existentialist,” and I always resonated with Paul Tillich’s description of God as the “Ground of Being.” I myself often use the term, “the varieties of existential thought,” to describe the pluralities of existential thinking, both past and present.

Trauma

When I began working in the field of trauma, I had another opportunity to draw upon existential teachings. I noted that it is common for men and women to undergo potentially traumatizing events; however, some of these lead to traumatic experiences. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) results not from events but from experiences, the way someone constructs meaning from an event. Medication is often helpful in the short term, but it cannot address the deep existential issues of PTSD. In 2018, Daniel Pitchford and I wrote about this problem for the anthology, *Humanistic Psychology: Current Trends and Future Prospects*. Because I am not a clinical psychologist, I often join with colleagues who have insights into psychotherapy for which I have no first-hand experience.

In 2014, the *International Journal of Existential Psychology & Psychotherapy* published my account of the dynamics of creative cognitive activity in the waking and dreaming processes. They are often thought of as pathological and counterproductive, but they may, in fact, be healthy and useful. During waking states, there is evidence suggesting that there are healthy benefits for creativity, even in the context of bipolar spectrum mood disorders, as well as in daily life. Yet creativity is often pathologized and misunderstood because of its assumed links with pathology or “abnormalities.” Creative functioning may be further understood as a metaphorical and perhaps as a psychoneurological descriptor. In view of these data, society might value innovative “divergence” rather than assuming that deviations from what is “normal” are invariably “pathological.” Indeed, creative personality traits may be useful predictors for the enhanced generation of divergent thought. In dreaming, one may see certain of these phenomena in even bolder relief, where our sensory world and the usual rules of logic are suspended, even while valuable insights may emerge.

The International Network on Personal Meaning made this article available to its readers, and I later discovered that Paul had paid special attention to the brain’s Default Mode Network (DMN), a collection of interconnected neurons in the brain’s cortex that is active when one does not focus on the outside world. I had been aware of the DMN’s function during sleep, daydreaming, and “mind wandering.” Moreover, Paul had suggested that the two latter events could precipitate an existential crisis. He suggested that this was especially common during the COVID-19 pandemic, when isolation allowed for more rumination than usual. The pandemic also marked an increase in requests for Paul to participate in interviews and podcasts, because the spread of COVID-19 raised issues that could best be answered by those with an existential orientation. I had faced a similar situation when a book I was co-authoring on suicide coincided

with the initial onslaught of the pandemic, capitalizing on our book's existential emphasis, and our use of case examples of those who had either succumbed to what we called "suicide's allure" or who had succumbed to COVID itself (Krippner et al., 2021).

In his monumental co-edited book, *The Human Quest for Meaning*, Paul noted that this effort had finally emerged as a serious candidate for scientific research and clinical applications, a quest that goes beyond survival efforts to focus on health and well-being. He bemoaned the erosion of moral fiber in Western societies and its concomitant *angst*, and hoped that the search and construction of meaning would "enter center stage" in clinical psychology and personality studies (Wong & Fry, 1998). This need still exists and Paul's contributions can be drawn upon to mend the tattered fabric of our times.

Second Wave Positive Psychology

When I met Paul and Lilian Wong at annual conventions of the American Psychological Association, I was impressed by their advocacy of seeking positive meanings in the lives of their clients and students (Wong, 2019). Each year they attended the dinners sponsored by APA's Division 32, the Society for Humanistic Psychology, and, on two separate occasions, they invited me to Toronto to speak at one of its functions. In 2014, at a meeting in Vancouver, they gave me the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Network on Personal Meaning.

When I began writing of existential psychology in the 1960s, I had no idea that anything I wrote would be deemed worthy of recognition; I had simply discovered a number of human issues that I felt could be better understood by appreciating the **meaning** (or the lack of it) inherent in my first-hand work with those affected by their educational challenges as well as their exposure to traumatizing experiences due to war and its aftermath. Needless to say, I always gave credit to Rollo

May, Viktor Frankl, and the other writers from whom I had learned so much. Additionally, my interest in Terror Management Theory resonated with Paul Wong's work with various end-of-life concerns, especially the Death Attitudes Profile that he co-authored (Wong et al., 1994).

Paul Wong set up the Research Institute for Flourishing and Suffering in Toronto, the research branch of the International Network on Personal Meaning (INPM). The International Society on Existential Positive Psychology, the professional wing of the INPM, publishes the *International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy*. It is remarkable to survey the results of Paul's organizational skills, and how he set so many wheels in motion that are still spinning.

Abraham Maslow introduced the term *positive psychology* in his 1954 book, *Motivation and Personality*, urging a focus on ways to live a "good life" rather than on mental illness and psychopathology. The field emphasizes positive experiences, positive traits, and positive institutions. When critics criticized positive psychology as neglecting the "shadow side" of life, Paul initiated "Second Wave Positive Psychology" by adding existential elements and creating a *yin/yang* dialectic. In ancient Chinese thought, *Yin* is associated with such qualities as the dark, negativity, and yielding, while *Yang* is marked by the light, positivity, and penetrating. Paul's dialectic and his incorporation of some existential *angst* brought deeper dimensions to positive psychology that countered critics who had noted it was too one-sided. In the meantime, Maslow can be credited for inaugurating humanistic psychology, positive psychology, and transpersonal psychology.

The first wave of positive psychology focused on happiness and wellbeing; the second wave added the positive psychology of suffering as the foundation for happiness and wellbeing (Wong, 2020, 2023). Paul's idea of "re-authoring" according to some meta-narrative (Vos et al., 2017) was one of the several ways of transforming suffering into a "hero's journey." This

contribution was in alignment with my use of the term “personal myth” to describe the meta-narrative that guides one’s decision-making, both on a conscious and unconscious levels.

For me, a “myth” is a statement or story about existential life issues that has consequences for behavior, for better or for worse. When people discover their personal myths, they can “re-author” the myths in ways that will serve them in positive ways. For example, a person might have a personal myth that holds that “I can never do anything as well as my brother, so why should I try?” That statement is rarely enunciated verbally as its roots can be found in early childhood experiences, such as a parent’s comparisons such as “Your brother works very hard to help with household chores while you sit around taking it easy.” “Why can’t you do as well in school as your brother?” “Your brother brings his friends home to meet our family, but you seem ashamed to have your friends meet our family.” A skilled therapist or counselor could help the client “re-author” this narrative in ways such as “I am my own person and need not be compared with my brother.” “I am happy that my brother has accomplished so much, but I have my own track record and I am proud of it.” “There are things I can learn from my brother, and perhaps he can learn from me as well” (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988).

If clients are not comfortable with the word “myth,” they can use “worldview,” “life script,” or some other term that they feel is descriptive. The origins of dysfunctional myths are unconscious and non-verbal in nature, hence clients can supplement “talk therapy” with art, dance, or psychodrama, all of which can also illustrate the changes over time. In the example of sibling rivalry, clients can transform feelings of bitterness, jealousy, and resentment into feelings of acceptance, endearment, and love. A “hero’s journey” that has been sidetracked or stalled can be transformed into an endeavor replete with happiness and joy.

However, the “journey” metaphor needs to be used cautiously. Alan Watts (1972), a dear friend of mine, often called himself a “philosophical entertainer.” When people asked him questions about the meaning of life, Alan never told them what to believe or what to do, much less what **not** to believe and what **not** to do. He simply spoke his truth, as he had experienced it. But Alan gave a very wise answer to those inquiries, namely: the purpose of life is simply to live. Alan was wary about seeing life as a “journey,” as this would negate one’s ability to enjoy the moment. In retrospect, one might see life as a journey, but to do so too early might dilute the lessons and pleasures of the moment. From this perspective, making the journey is more important than reaching the goal. Again, existence precedes essence.

In retrospect, I surmise that this book's greatest contribution is to advance positive mental health and world peace through meaning and spirituality. Paul’s brilliance, compassion, and humanity have provided a legacy that few have matched and that none have surpassed.

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