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## **THE PROBLEM OF THE MEANING OF LIFE IN KAZIMIERZ DĄBROWSKI'S PSYCHOTHERAPY**

**Contents of Article: What is "Therapy through Meaning"? What is "Psychotherapy through Development"? What is "Pathology"? What are "Dynamisms of Development"? What is "Being"? What is the "Role of the Therapist"? What is "Auto-Psychotherapy"? Notes, Bibliography.**

The question of the meaning of life is most frequently taken up in existential psychology (including psychotherapy) and philosophy. Existential psychotherapy (V. Frankl, R. May), which notices the importance of the necessity of the meaning of life and points at the patients' inability to satisfy it as the source of their crisis, makes their patients aware of the importance of pursuing the "meaning" by means of an intellectual therapy, whose aim is to extend the patient's system of values. Although it applies phenomenological terminology and methods, existential psychotherapy does not represent a phenomenological stance, which would motivate it to fully experience the "meaning" itself during therapy [1].

Experiencing the meaning of life, typical of the phenomenological stance, which, according to M. Scheler, constitutes real phenomenology, is present in the psychotherapy suggested by K. Dąbrowski. "A philosopher - phenomenologist craving for experiencing existence - points out M. Scheler - will try to explore the sources which unveil the content of the world. His reflecting look approaches the point in which experience and the subject (world) meet, no matter if it is something physical or psychological (...). A ray of reflection should only be aimed at it, and only if it is present in the nearest and highest contact." (Scheler 1957, p. 381). The author of the Theory of Positive Disintegration does not call his therapy "a therapy through meaning" and does not analyze the importance of the search for the meaning of life; neither does he declare that he will pursue this meaning throughout the therapeutic process (as V. Frankl does). However, putting forward the proposal of therapeutic process, he approaches the "meaning" itself.

His entire theory, including psychotherapy, is not about questioning the meaning of life (which is clearly typical of V. Frankl), but rather about the very "meaning", as it reaches its source, which is the human developmental instinct, and unveils its content, which is the development of the whole personality pursuing the ideal.

Kazimierz Dąbrowski seldom ponders in a purely intellectual manner on the significance of the pursuit of "meaning". He hardly treats "meaning" as something existing "outside". When he acts as M. Scheler would want him to, he does so in the presence of "meaning". When talking about e.g., man's dramatic attitude towards life, which he considers as the "meaning" itself, he emphasizes that the effort made to find one's meaning of life is not of a philosophical kind, but rather consists in experiencing and struggling against a real personal tragedy (Dąbrowski, 1975, p. 34). In his therapy he motivates patients to experience the "meaning" themselves, *hic et nunc*.

Whereas in V. Frankl's psychotherapy, what is dominant is a reflection, i.e. a mental process, based on observation and examination (induction and deduction) of facts related to the problem of "meaning", which M. Scheler, a great phenomenologist, would consider a phenomenological method. In K. Dąbrowski's work, an emotional insight into the essence of

"meaning" occurs, which M. Scheler would call a truly phenomenological stance (Scheler 1957, p. 380).

### **WHAT IS "THERAPY THROUGH MEANING"?**

That is why I believe that Dąbrowski's psychotherapy can be named a phenomenological and existential psychotherapy. It does not represent a phenomenological approach to the problem of "meaning", which would be related to methodology, but rather consists of a phenomenological experience of the very "meaning" and not the problem of "meaning", which is related to the phenomenological stance (Scheler 1957, p. 381).

The existential thread in K. Dąbrowski's theory is quite clear. The problem of becoming a man, his dynamic nature (the author uses the term "dynamic" on purpose when referring to psychological processes), constant development, to which he is "condemned", the choice between development and "non-development" (Kierkegaard's "fear and trembling"), as well as nature leading to higher development are all problems close to existential philosophy, at least in K. Jasper's works, whose "passion of the night" the author refers to frequently (Dąbrowski 1979, p. 119; cf. Tatarkiewicz 1958, p. 484; cf. Jaspers 1978, p. 274).

The relation between phenomenology, especially from M. Scheler's perspective, and Dąbrowski's theory can be found, for instance, in the negation of the "pleasure principle" as the exclusively prevailing one, in a multifaceted manner of perceiving reality (in which M. Scheler saw "up", "down", "front", "back" and "sides"), in both the intuitive and emotional, as well as the reflective experiencing of values (which Dąbrowski calls an intuitive and synthetic process), in particular recognition of the emotional sphere of a human being (a famous polemic of K. Dąbrowski with C von Monakow), and finally in a shared interest in the human essence (Węgrzecki 1975, p. 19, 47, 87; Dąbrowski 1980, p. 46).

Drawing analogies between existentialism, phenomenology and the Theory of Positive Disintegration is not the topic of this dissertation, but rather a background to the deliberations about the meaning of life in the developmental psychotherapy.

### **WHAT IS "PSYCHOTHERAPY THROUGH DEVELOPMENT"?**

I will now provide examples to explain the problem in question. In his practical proposal concerning therapy, Dąbrowski never calls for focusing on the theoretical problem of "meaning" and its significance for human life (which is typical of V. Frankl's logotherapy), but rather reaches its essence. Even the name he uses to refer to his psychotherapy, which is "psychotherapy through development", contains "meaning" implicitly. Dąbrowski considers development as a "particular meaning", which conditions the "global meaning" of life (which we also refer to as superior meaning) (Dąbrowski 1981).

"Psychotherapy through development" can be equally called psychotherapy "through meaning". However, I suppose that, given the fact that it is psychotherapy of what is already perceived as potential "meaning", heading through "particular meanings" for the "global meaning", the most adequate name would be – the experimental psychotherapy of "meaning" or simply the "psychotherapy of meaning".

The author of the "developmental therapy" often refers to the principle "where do we come from and where are we going", which Goethe presented in "Egmont" and earlier, King Oedipus, asking "who am I and where do I come from". Kazimierz Dąbrowski, using the phrase "where do we come from and where are we going" (a reference to the book of B.

Suchodolski that has the same title, which Dąbrowski often used as a title of subsections of his books, instead of the phrase "what is the meaning of human life"), is an example of a phenomenologist who combines in the very phrase he uses, his reflecting look on "meaning" with the experience of it, thus referring to "it" in its presence, as M. Scheler would say. On the other hand, when he concentrates on discussing the principle, which would enable him to reflect upon the broader problem of the meaning of life, to observe the problem from the outside, he approaches what the "meaning" is itself. Thus, he focuses on the developmental potential, autonomic human forces and the process of hierarchizing values, namely on dynamisms, which are the potential meaning or are "particular meanings" (Dąbrowski 1980, p. 67).

When identifying "developmental psychotherapy" with the "psychotherapy of meaning" (or 'psychotherapy of the experience of meaning') I meant psychotherapy of "something" that is the "meaning" itself at its potential stage. Kazimierz Dąbrowski, even before the psychotherapy starts, can notice the relationship (of linking rather than cause and effect nature) between the patient's ailment and his pursuit of the meaning of life and so he can see the "meaning" of the ailment itself. A patient, according to Professor Dąbrowski, is an individual who is hurt, excitable, with a low frustration threshold and existentially inclined (Dąbrowski 1980, p. 9). What is commonly called "pathology", in Dąbrowski's theory is a reaction to the tendency to stiffening and negative adaptation, it is contrary to pathology, as it stimulates the development of the internal environment (Dąbrowski 1974, pp. 6-7).

### **WHAT IS "PATHOLOGY"?**

Pathology is therefore meaningful, since it is a symptom of the patient's clear tendency (it is especially applicable to neurotics, psychoneurotics and the so-called schizophrenic neurotics) to development, which is a synonym of a "particular meaning" conditioning "superior meaning". Dąbrowski in his therapeutical practice does not try to eliminate the patient's pathology, which can be called an 'otherness', nor does he try to soothe or eliminate the symptoms of illness, but rather to transform it in a positive and creative manner. It can be achieved only in cooperation with the patient who should 'succumb' to the process of disintegration, turning throughout the therapy into positive multidimensional disintegration, conditioning secondary disintegration, which is a synonym of the personality, constituting the superior meaning of human life.

The process of disintegration, understood as the breaking of the patient's internal structure, which is too cohesive. His one-sided relations with the outside world, is what pain, fear and the tragic were in the philosophy of S. Kierkegaard and K. Jaspers. In the philosophy of the latter, disintegration would be reflected in "border situations", which make everything break, flow and become torn, which enable us to alienate ourselves from the world in order to return, probably on a higher level (Jaspers 1954).

The main idea behind positive disintegration is, in my opinion, most closely related to the assumptions formulated by H. Bergson, a remarkable philosopher, who supposes that development, treated as movement, determination and tendency, is the basic element of any existence; in the evolutionary movement there are contradictory tendencies, which were initially linked, but as they developed, they became divergent (Bergson 1919, pp. 90-95).

Bergson's development appears in K. Dąbrowski's theory as a developmental instinct provoking disintegration, realizing itself as Bergson's tendencies in opposition to each other. In "developmental psychotherapy" they are known as dynamisms. The mutual linking and

splitting of dynamisms in a higher, more constructive form, within the process of secondary disintegration, appear in Bergson's theory as tendencies complementing each other in their initial stage. In the Theory of Positive Disintegration, Bergson's principle is reversed: the dynamisms (tendencies) complement each other at the final stage of positive integration, namely in secondary disintegration.

Kazimierz Dąbrowski, however, does not deny that at the initial stage, before splitting, those dynamisms complemented each other; he even suggests that they were linked within the developmental instinct, though probably at a more primitive stage. Although Henri Bergson acknowledges the mutual complementing of contradictory tendencies at the initial stage, he claims that only by returning to their own essence (e.g. divergent tendencies of mind and intuition, spirituality and materiality etc.) can they provoke the "vital force", the revolutionary movement leading to creation (Bergson 1919, pp. 90-95). They both saw progress in the mutual complementing of divergent elements.

### **WHAT ARE "DYNAMISMS OF DEVELOPMENT"?**

The most important stage within the process of developmental psychotherapy (along with catharsis and insight) is recognition and the analysis of patient's individual dynamisms, whose aim is to weaken toxicity of pathological dynamisms, opposed to the healthy ones, to weaken by linking them in order to achieve the creative transformation of the former. Every dynamism, apparently even the most pathological one, has meaning in the therapeutic process, which is reflected in its name, inherently containing potential "meaning" (dynamism = development = meaning). The proper application of dynamisms leads to the situation in which symptoms become states and positive processes, from the point of view of the development of the personality.

And so, for instance fear, excessively developed psychic pain and extreme suffering hide the inner richness of the individual, their altruism, empathy, high level of emotionality and creative tendencies; compulsions - excessive emotional sensitivity and responsibility, excessive introversion; autism or even catatonia - the necessity of perceiving and functioning in another, perhaps higher, dimension, in maturity and genuine development; hallucinations, psychotic episodes - also empathy, idealism or concentrating on one's own inner life, in which the unknown is experienced (Dąbrowski 1974).

It is essential to ask which dynamisms let the patient experience the essence of "meaning" to the greatest extent. In my opinion, those are: creative instinct, the third factor, identification (including especially the identification with a 'person') and finally autopsychotherapy, which K. Dąbrowski considers as a dynamism. Autopsychotherapy is undoubtedly a dynamism, but a more complex and secondary one, stemming from the dynamisms already mentioned.

The creative instinct (a higher form of a developmental instinct), appearing at the third stage of development, namely at the multilevel spontaneous disintegration stage, manifests itself in breaking the patient's internal environment and in their surpassing of adaptation norms (Dąbrowski 1975, p. 49).

The stimulation of the dynamism within the patient, which is a potential "meaning", as it triggers a creative act, leads to relieving excessive tension, self-worrying, dissatisfaction with oneself, feeling of guilt, shame of oneself, positive maladjustment; it leads to a different perception of oneself and the environment. This kind of dynamism calms the patient's

anxiety towards what is "different", new and, at the same time, creative in themselves. It requires that the therapist should penetrate the subconscious infantile spheres in order to release child's hidden positive creative inclinations, their magical and animistic tendencies.

The applied creative instinct, which, in my opinion, often comes before the signs of excitability and sensitivity, leads to a clear appearance of the dynamism of the "third factor", which I refer to as the "rebellion", which is a sign of the creative act itself. The patient's becoming conscious of the existence of this 'factor', which, I suppose, appeared much earlier (perhaps together with the life instinct), is a stage at which starts his full and constant experiencing of the particular meaning of life, in which he sees the light of the superior meaning.

At this point the patient starts to discover his "own bottom", he "feels" and "touches" himself, and not from the world's angle, but rather directly, "with his own eyes". He begins to fight his fear of "being himself" slowly, "being independent", a fear which Otto Rank - Freud's great disciple and, at the same time, antagonist, would have called a primary fear, caused by birth shock and separation from the mother (Romanowska-Łakomy 1980).

### **WHAT IS "BEING"?**

I once compared (in one of my articles) Dąbrowski's "third factor" to what Pavlov and Berdyaev called the freedom instinct, which I indicated as the source of the primary needs of a person, which oppose the social and biological needs and Freud's "pleasure principle", thus the side called by Freud the "reality principle".

Finding the relationship between the "third factor" and the "reality principle" requires profound knowledge, thorough analysis and a synthesis of Freud's and Dąbrowski's theories. It is clear that Freud, by calling the "reality principle" a drive toward death, a destructive drive, meant the "element" which makes a man turn away from biological and social life. On the other hand, Dąbrowski saw in the "third factor" a possibility in the human to surpass the inner (drives) and outer environments, surpass biological cycles, psychological types, a possibility to "appear", thus "being" bio-socially independent.

It is related to the theme in existential philosophy, which concerned the human leaving himself (depasser), or Jaspers' and Marcel's theme of 'being oneself' (Jaspers 1932, p. 35). "Being" which appears thanks to the "third factor" differs from the existential "being" in that it aims at surpassing in a way to create permanent values, namely essence. At this point K. Dąbrowski approaches the phenomenology of M. Scheler, who said that only "a man - if he is himself - can, as a living person, leave himself and contribute to the creation of importances, ideas, values, aims subordinated to the eternal Logos, eternal love and the eternal will (Scheler 1966, p. 49)".

This eternal "element", which makes the "third factor" and is subordinated to the Logos, is adopted by the "identification" dynamism, which in developmental psychotherapy appears in the patient's multilevel organized disintegration stage. And that is why the therapist should take special care of the patient when the presence of this dynamism becomes clearer, as its improper functioning may stop the advancing process of therapy, proceeding in accordance with the Theory of Positive Disintegration, in which the subsiding of the ill symptoms and a quick "forced" bringing back of the patient to normal life is not the most important thing.

### **WHAT IS THE "ROLE OF THE THERAPIST"?**

I imagine that the therapist's role would not be to make decisions for the patient or even suggesting him certain solutions. Moreover, I suppose that the therapist should at this point reduce the excessive gratification of patient's affiliation needs, in order to start the patient's independent actions resulting from free will.

The therapist's care for patient should rather consist in freeing him from being dependent from others, including himself, and then in motivating him to fight for free choice and consolidating "himself" as an independent person, to identify with the positive qualities of his own "self", achieved thanks to his "third factor". The therapist must prevent the patient from excessively identifying himself with others, and his own negative "self" ("lower self"). A joint search and consolidation throughout therapy of what is permanent and positive within the patient and refers to the present, past and future, provides special conditions for the process of identification, which, supported by the "third factor", gives the patient a unique opportunity to experience the "meaning".

Identification with the 'superior self', taking place during the process of disintegration, thanks to the identification dynamism, resembles the existentialists' assumptions, who stated that a man can be "something more than he really is". Kazimierz Dąbrowski would have added: something that his lower "self" is not at the moment or something "his higher" self is, not only at present, but something it was in the past and can be in the future. And this "self", appearing in the prospective aspect is this "something more", as existentialists called it.

K. Dąbrowski clearly approaches existentialism, when he claims that human identification with a member of the family or a friend's death is actually identification with the "self", close to transcendence, which existentialists call human identification with "something more" than one is (Dąbrowski 1974, pp. 84-85). The development of the process of proper identification leads to the appearance of the dynamism of autopsychotherapy (which outside the process of therapy is called self-upbringing). The patient enters at this point the stage of the full experience of the "meaning of his life", the superior meaning and what begins is now is the process of secondary integration, being a synonym of the personality. It is the moment in which full and mature self-consciousness is shaped, self-consciousness combined with self-influence, which enables the feeling of the "meaning".

Consciousness is a quality, which is a permanent value (essence) and which M. Scheler considered as a crucial human quality. Therefore, it is the meaning itself (Scheler 1966, pp. 39-42). Thanks to full self-consciousness, the patient notices, believes and succumbs to positive disintegration, which he tries to shape himself.

### **WHAT IS "AUTO-PSYCHOTHERAPY"?**

When the patient moves on to the full stage of autopsychotherapy, in which the therapist's role is less and less significant, is by choice a conscious surpassing of the "pleasure principle", a conscious experience of suffering, pain, fear, perceiving in those states positive values for his own development and thus, perceiving the meaning as well. It is, at the same time, the criterion for entering by the patient (self-patient) the path of the development of his own personality.

Following this path, along with frequent straying from it, is a stage of creating personality, by including of the values achieved thanks to the "third factor" and shaped by the

"identification" dynamism, values which Dąbrowski calls essences (the common one and the individual one). It is worth noticing how much in common those essences have with the human spheres (intimate and social) distinguished by M. Scheler in the "person", which, like Dąbrowski's essence, are linked and equal in terms of their primeval nature (Scheler 1980). The essences of personality which emerge as a result of positive disintegration are permanent and unchanging values, which become the most important human qualities in the "personality ideal".

Therefore, the "personality ideal" plays the role of Scheler's spiritual person, independent of "vital and psychological causality" (Scheler 1966, p. 47). "Man as a vital person", says M. Scheler, "is undoubtedly a blind alley of nature, its end (...), as a potential spiritual person (...) a man is something else than a blind alley, he is a clear and wonderful way out" (Scheler 1925, pp. 16-17).

The way out of the blind alley is for the author of the "therapy through development", despite "fear and trembling", the linking of human pain with the creative act, leading to the creation of transcendental values, which are the heart of the meaning of human existence and which reach transcendental meaning.

Dąbrowski's psychotherapy, utterly humanistic, is an attempt to reach the direct act of experiencing the phenomenon of "meaning", which makes it, at the same time, a positive answer to the question asked by existential philosophers, whether life has any meaning, and a practical realization of what existential psychotherapy tries to explain to its patients (through analysis). It is just a proof that our life is meaningful.

## NOTES

[1] M. Scheler distinctly emphasizes the difference between the phenomenological stance and method (cf. Węgrzecki 1975, p. 131).

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