

Dear Ernesto

Here are some thoughts about my increasing unease regarding 'identity politics' and the way it is entering public discussions. I am wondering what your responses would be.....

I agree there is systemic privilege of particular groups over others and that this can be addressed at the political and social level. We can develop a society that is more open and egalitarian. But how do we do that?

In America 'identity politics' is consuming the political narrative. Interactions are analysed in terms of who is privileged and who is oppressed. The 'privileged' person (based upon someone else's analysis of their privilege) is almost always assumed to be wrong and their point of view (of whatever issue they are trying to present) invalid. The person from the 'oppressed category' of society is automatically right and to be listened to seriously. This form of 'liberation' is aggressive, bordering on scapegoating and it is beginning to resemble a witch hunt where only one point of view is tolerated. Any diversity of thought is attacked and silenced, but not just the point of view but the person expressing it. The viewpoint is wrong but so is the person. They are not 'woke', not aware, in the grip of their implicit and unconscious privilege. But they are not pitied, they are vilified. Why doesn't everyone have the "privilege" to insist upon a determination to be heard *exactly* rather than stereotyped or caricatured.

This form of 'politics', I would say, is an overcorrection and open to abusive manipulation. It seems fuelled by the immediacy and superficiality of social media formats. It strikes me as immature, using overly emotional and exaggerated language like 'taking X down!', 'nailing X', 'calling X out!'. The language shows that the object is to obliterate the opposition, the opposition being anyone who is not expressing exactly the same narrative in exactly the same way. All this with an eye on the camera - much of this behaviour seems ego-based, look at me, look how ideologically "right on" I am.... This is the emergence of an 'illiberal left' that matches the 'alt-right' in terms of vehemence and fundamentalism. Is there not a fundamental contradiction in trying to liberate through oppression?

I believe we need system change and I believe I see power & privilege (class, race, gender, sexuality, religious, etc) structured into our systems. I have always been on the far left in my understanding of things. But I have always valued free thought, so I worry about some of the analyses of power that I witness happening in America at the moment, across campuses and leaking out wider and soon internationally. It might be that some of the narrative around 'identity politics' is unique to the American context but I have not seen American activists aware of that cultural "imperialism". Social media mostly ignores national borders. I would not want that political development to be imposed on other cultures where it is at best an ill-fitting import.

I do not want to jump on board the way that the left is using power analysis to stop free thinking and debate. And I will never jump on board the right-wing agenda or knowingly against oppressed people. So where do I fit?

In this form of 'identity politics' discussion and this version of 'social justice' work, everyone is an instance of a category. And certain activists are presenting themselves as claiming to speak for a whole 'category' of people. But are they?

Using the broad categories of 'white' 'male' 'heterosexual' to assign who has power is far too simplistic. Those who are developing identity politics realised that and brought out 'intersectionality'. You can belong to more than one privileged group, example 'straight white male' (where is class?), or 'black female disabled', or presumably 'black gay male middle class' -

supposedly a mix of privilege and discrimination. If we keep going with these category-crossings, eventually we will rediscover the individual - that each one of us is infinitely complex and none of us fits any simple category nor do we act, or are we responded to, as a simple category.

Also, we respond to our group identities in unique ways, we don't just 'belong'. We can resist or collude or rebel or accept. Not everything can be seen clearly if our analysis is only about violence and power. You can see the extent of the control that is wanted over human interaction when the accusation of 'micro-aggressions' is used to shame an individual - if a so-called 'oppressed person' (no one is just oppressed) says they *feel* it as a micro-aggression then it just is. No evidence is required. The 'powerful person' (no one is just powerful) cannot defend themselves without further confirming the accusation. The oppressed person feels it, so it is fact. The privileged person is accused and therefore guilty and must accept their guilt publicly.

How does a shy successful man who ends up with a dominating controlling girlfriend fit this analysis?

One thing I like about working with bodily experience is that it is entirely 'bottom-up' not 'top-down'. The body will correct my own thinking and assumptions as well as offer an understanding of the situations I live through. It is this complexity that I want to see developed in progressive politics, not adolescent name-calling and superficial bullying.

I worry that 'systemic change' could become 'top-down'. In the American developments across campuses and on the left I have seen that. It's a disturbing situation that reminds me of when I studied psychoanalysis. Any rejection of the analyst's interpretation was called 'resistance' and was further evidence that the theory was correct and the client was 'in denial'. That kind of totalitarian thinking, perhaps with the best of intentions, feels very dangerous to me. A 'straight white male' can be accused of all sorts of 'privilege' and if he objects, it's another indication of how unconscious he is of his privilege. It is not taken as a challenge to the conceptual scheme at all. It should be, in my view. Everyone deserves to be heard and taken seriously. *Every ideology and everyone* is open to challenge and critique.

We have to be so careful not to reproduce in our progressive alliances the kind of conformity and thought control that we witness on the right, with such horrible consequences.

Over to you Ernesto.... Hello from Lisbon. Greg

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From Ernesto:

I pretty much agree with just about everything you write, Greg. It is terrifying to me that dialogue and discourse have so rapidly descended to byte-sized declarations that demand unequivocal agreement. It seems to me that the very structure of so much contemporary social media imposes severe limitations both upon the length and complexity of communications. Sentences and statements become shorter and shorter and, with that, their content cannot easily hold anything but the most direct, un-nuanced, often simplistic comments. It takes incredible skill, as Hemingway demonstrated, to pare down and edit statements so that their beauty and complexity still shines forth. Very few of us can accomplish this, yet the media that dominate our lives insist that we do so. As a result, what emerge are typically crass, ugly superficial pronouncements that remain closed to any genuine dialogue. Instead, they provoke multiple monologues of either agreement or disagreement which, in turn, provoke further monologues *ad infinitum*.

What makes these forms of communication so attractive that they remain so rarely questioned with

regard to their limitations? I suspect that there may be many possible answers to such but perhaps one that increasingly stands out for me is that they can sometimes generate a form of communication which identifies the communicator as an "empowered victim". What I mean by this is that the communication expresses a sort of contradictory statement composed of "I am a victim" and "In remaining a victim, I find and maintain my strength". As such, behind such statements is the insistence that "I remain a victim" - rather than move beyond such - because only by doing so will I continue to experience some sort of strength. I am reminded here of the title of one of Leonard Cohen's books of poetry: "The Energy of Slaves". That seems to capture the idea for me.

Now, it seems to me that many of the issues that you raise regarding 'identity politics' might be driven by something along the lines of this idea of an "empowered victim". Certainly, it seems to link in well with the angry, often personally abusive and even at times near-violent responses to anyone who has challenged the stance taken by many in the #MeToo movement. I have been shocked by the complete dismissal of views expressed by some women such as Germaine Greer and Margaret Atwood who have sought to raise consciousness towards that of genuine liberated empowerment. Instead, such voices have been vilified, had their lives threatened, and treated as traitors to the cause because they dare to question the exclusivity of victimisation that is being demanded. I've seen similar outcomes in the current "feminist vs transgender" debates regarding the representation of women in political parties. And, I would guess, the same sort of dilemma runs through so many strands and variants of "identity politics".

Okay so... What interests me is to explore whether there is anything in our understanding of existential phenomenology that might shed at least some partial light upon what's happening here. Here's an initial, far-from-worked-out idea:

As I understand it, phenomenology would argue that the more restricted or enclosed (or sedimented) the structure is, the more limited become its interpretative possibilities. The pay-off for this is an increasingly fixed, secure, unshaken and unshakeable certainty as to "what is" and what it's "meaning" is. At the same time, the price is that any arising challenge to that fixed certainty, and the security it brings, must be dismissed, avoided, denied (dissociated from existing meaning - including that meaning which we call "identity"). At a deeper - or more complex - level, that rigidity of meaning paradoxically increases the likelihood of imposing an experiential (or embodied) meaninglessness upon the meaning being maintained - the more rigid, the more bland, demanding, empty is the lived experience of the person who clutches to that meaning. UNLESS the person can off-set that by becoming the "defender of the truth", the True Believer, the fanatic, the fundamentalist. And, in turn, such strategies are aided by the structure itself which encourages the exclusion of any alternative that might diminish, "open up", question or reveal the limitations of that rigidly maintained meaning.

I'm guessing here that much of the power and persistence of the very worst abuses of "identity politics" might be being maintained, if not extended, by the structural conditions set by not only the content of what is being communicated but also by the means through which the communications are carried out.

But, if so, this raises another, perhaps far more important - and difficult - question: What is it that is so appealing to so many about restricting meaning/restricting structures? Yes, there is the security, the clarity, of knowing who I am without doubt/uncertainty/complexity. But, if so, what has made *that* stance so attractive? Are we genuinely living in a time that is so extremely insecure and uncertain (or, more accurately, which we have come to believe is so extremely insecure and uncertain) that anything that might off-set that at least with regard to removing questions and doubts about "who I am/am not" or "who an other/others is/are/is not/are not is just *so* attractive that the price of victimisation/enslavement to its structural simplicity seems well worth paying? Not least if

that very enslavement seems to empower me via its certainty/security/simplicity. Which is worse? To be 'free' and confused/confounded/uncertain/destabilised by the complexity of self/others/the world? Or to be a slave who is cocooned by the strength of the simple and unchallengeable 'truth' of his/her existence? (Which is, usually, that "the bad other" made me so and now that this has been exposed I - and any number of others - can stand out and be counted as one who was made a victim to that "bad other". And more, that today, thanks to the media available to me, I can shine a spotlight on that "bad other", even seek to extinguish his (for it usually is "his") influence/power/existence.

There is undoubtedly something courageous and strong and laudable about exposing one's enslavement and, as well, exposing those others - be they persons or structures - that have imposed and profited from it. The problem, as I see it, is that this is only part of the struggle. Just as challenging - or possibly even more so - is that subsequent challenge to me: Who can I be now that I no longer have to be that victim/slave? And what might be the confusions and challenges of the person who is open to the possibility of freedom? Not least when it occurs to that person that the victimhood/slavery structure that bound them for so long was not something that *only* "the bad other" imposed upon them.

It seems to me that it is this second challenge that all the manifestations of the current issues you raise insist upon rejecting and avoiding. Perhaps, it's just a temporary state of affairs. But I worry that it may not be so: there are way too many examples of social/political/personal liberation that have sunk into forms of oppression at every level just because while they were willing to point the finger at the "bad other" that crucial second challenge of turning the finger back on oneself never happened. What is even more unfortunate is that the communicative structures that once might have had some influence in pointing this out have been made peripheral, if not irrelevant (newspapers, in-depth analyses, expertise, etc etc). Instead, we rely on seemingly "egalitarian" communicative structures whose very make-up dismisses/cannot hold such influences.

I wonder sometimes if we are on the verge of entering a new "dark age". One wherein we are besieged with and structured by information but have willingly given up our ability to understand.

And on that happy note.....

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Dear Ernesto

We agree about much. To review:

I especially like your emphasis on how the formats of public dialogue have reduced us to "byte-sized declarations", no complexity or nuance and very little real thought. I usually find posts with headlines 'the one thing you need to know to be a success', 'the five things no one else knows about how to write well', 'You would never guess the one true secret to wonderful relationships', 'The top three reasons X was wrong to blog about Y', 'The one story you must read this week in order to understand what's really happening in America'... It bothers me even more that these 'click-bait' articles are now published by mainstream media that used to be celebrated for serious analysis and courageous investigative journalism.

We are manipulated by stories that are not designed to inform, but instead seem aimed at one goal – to grab hold of us emotionally and drag us deeper into tedious online diatribes, closing us off to any interest in 'the other side', but keeping us engaged in media chock full of product and service advertising and political propaganda.

I agree with your analysis that an insistence on "victimhood" instils a lot of power in the victim to silence and shame 'the oppressor' while insisting that theirs is the only legitimate voice to be heard

on the topic. The victim and their allies seem in fact to exercise great power over anyone who might challenge as counterproductive this strategy of victimhood. You mention Greer and Atwood. The victim must be protected at all costs, they are entitled to a 'safe space' which is heavily censored so that everyone is controlled by the victim's accusation of what could potentially 'trigger' them.

You describe how existential-phenomenological therapy sees the appeal of sedimented structure as based on its offer of unshakeable security. However, the rigidity of this certainty has the paradoxical likelihood of generating a blandness, a lack of meaning, a feeling of emptiness. With 'identity politics' you (Ernesto) see the content influenced by the social media format that encourages simplicity and fundamentalism. You also wonder if the wider social situation is so uncertain and insecure that we need this rigid structure around our beliefs. And social media offers a venue where 'the bad other' whose views confuse us, can be annihilated.

Your second challenge is more poignant. I think I would say it slightly differently. How does a person (like me) remain open to self-questioning my place in the world, and what has come to me because of where I was born, class, race, without adopting and ensconcing myself in a hermetic ideology that explains *everything* without any reference to, or validation from, my actual lived experience? How can I truly remain open to questioning, myself, systems of hierarchy and oppression as well as others' analysis of this? There are uncomfortable questions that bring into view aspects of my rather privileged experience of life, making me squirm because they resonate. There are also newer uncomfortable questions I have about whether hierarchies are always bad, whether full equality of outcome (rather than equality of opportunity) will ever be achieved or even if it should be... I value diversity and protection of vulnerable minorities, but not the means of 'protection' of these values whereby I lose the fundamental spirit that underlies them.

In response to your thoughts:

I recently returned from a large European Focusing conference where I presented and participated in two workshops that may have some bearing on this discussion. The workshop I presented asked the question of 'what form of organising and what kind of organisations would evolve if we took the embodied process of Focusing seriously as a social practice rather than just an "individual or interpersonal practice"?' In focusing we encounter the body's (the self's?) nature as *process* rather than as set content. The felt sense is always 'pushing for' a next step, a forward movement, and often surprising insights come that would not come from the 'person' themselves. Gendlin pointed to his phenomenon by occasionally timidly saying 'life is living us' ...

Embodied process seems to include much more than can be explicitly thought and described, an intricate order that is not at all chaotic. It does not need a blunt fixed structure imposed upon it. If we take what we find from Focusing and applied it to organising, we would find a lose 'structure' that holds an open space within which there is no centralised control, no certainty, organisations as process rather than as entities that we conserve and serve at all costs. It was an interesting experiment, and I think it touches on some of what you describe as our tendency to concretise, substantiate, make verbs into nouns so we have something fixed to hold on to. And to defend.

The second event was an Interest group that eventually evolved into a discussion of Identity Politics and how can we (as Focusing practitioners in this case) keep open an appreciation for the complexity of living in the face of simplified categories and divisive polarisation? It requires courage. And we decided that our version of feeling 'safe' came from being in an open space, kept open to dialogue and deep listening, as distinct from the 'safe spaces' sprouting across university campuses which are highly censored and where free thinking is shut down so as not to 'trigger' anyone.

This weekend's *Brain Pickings*, a well-researched and insightful weekly newsletter by Maria

Popova, offered some thought-provoking words from Virginia Woolf (*Moments of Being*, her only autobiographical writings). Woolf expresses sentiments that felt oddly relevant to my understanding of our discussion:

“As a child then, my days, just as they do now, contained a large proportion of this cotton wool, this non-being. Week after week passed at St Ives and nothing made any dint upon me. Then, for no reason that I know about, there was a sudden violent shock; something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life. I will give a few instances. The first: I was fighting with Thoby [Woolf’s older brother] on the lawn. We were pommelling each other with our fists. Just as I raised my fist to hit him, I felt: why hurt another person? I dropped my hand instantly, and stood there, and let him beat me. I remember the feeling. It was a feeling of hopeless sadness. It was as if I became aware of something terrible; and of my own powerlessness. I slunk off alone, feeling horribly depressed. The second instance was also in the garden at St Ives. I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; “That is the whole”, I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower. It was a thought I put away as being likely to be very useful to me later. The third case was also at St Ives. Some people called Valpy had been staying at St Ives, and had left. We were waiting at dinner one night, when somehow I overheard my father or my mother say that Mr Valpy had killed himself. The next thing I remember is being in the garden at night and walking on the path by the apple tree. It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr Valpy’s suicide. I could not pass it. I stood there looking at the grey-green creases of the bark — it was a moonlit night — in a trance of horror. I seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which I could not escape. My body seemed paralysed”.

Woolf has captured beautifully what I think the simplistic ‘identity politics’ view of human living is meant to obfuscate. The beautiful horror, the confusing complexity that is immediately given only if we are open to it, which later we may attempt to understand or describe, but fully aware that the given experience exceeds our attempts and retains its mystery and elusiveness. What is ‘identity politics’ protecting us from having to feel?

Woolf concludes that is her ability to receive such ‘shocks’ that makes her a writer. She now welcomes these ruptures in “reality”. I think she articulates beautifully what is lost when we restrict our experience by trying to avoid all shocks, cutting ourselves off from the full complexity of the universe as given and instead hiding in rigid ideologies.

“I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a

token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together”.

Woolf concludes this passage, “From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we — I mean all human beings — are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.

Can existential-phenomenological therapists join with other practices and practitioners to develop formats that remain open to this ‘shock’? Could a simple practical form of “embodied phenomenology” be taught so that more people have some way to “hold on” that is not holding onto a fixed construction, a rigid structure, or any ‘thing’ at all?

Interested to hear your thoughts and if you see a practical step forwards?

Greg

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Hi Greg

These quotes from Virginia Woolf are pretty amazing and, as you write, they have an alluring relevance that our discussion. I was particularly taken by her last quote which is an attempt to explore the overall significance of the "shocks" and what they point her towards. It struck me that she is trying to express that experience of shifting from "being" (ie: substance) to "becoming" (ie: process). Many, of course, have attempted to make such a distinction. The theoretical physicist, David Bohm, for example, distinguished "the implicate order" from its source point of "wholeness". It's there as well, both explicitly and implicitly, in much of existential phenomenology. I've made my own stab at it via the distinction between "the worldview" and "worlding". Whatever the label used, I think the shared attempt is to highlight that "shocking" awareness that comes upon us (often under the most unexpected circumstances) during which the "ordinary" experience of identifying and experiencing various manifestations of "becoming" (eg. flowers, trees, persons) as truly separate and distinct from one another becomes pointless, absurd, and impossible. What I think this illuminates for us is that such experiences don't simply point us to the inseparable inter-relatedness of all manifested substances but, rather, and much more significantly, that the seemingly separate manifested substances are just that - manifestations of "becoming" (or whatever preferred label you wish to insert). They appear as multiple substance outcomes/expressions of becoming (or whatever) which remains inherently incomprehensible in any accurate or complete.

Now, what might this have to do with our discussion, as well as to your question of what existential phenomenology might have to offer?

In brief, I think that the highlighting of this distinction between being and becoming through our own lived experience of such moments where the distinction is felt/embodied/"shocks" us serves to take us back to our more ordinary separate substance/manifestation stances and provides the opportunity for us to consider these in a different, perhaps more critically-attuned or questioning manner.

So, to the point:

Without those 'shocking' moments, our typical stance (at least in the West) is to insist upon a particular form of separatist dualism (or "binary-way" of thinking). It's a sort of **vertical dualism**.

male | female  
good | bad  
right | wrong  
perpetrator | victim

This way permits a separatist demarcation between states/experiences/values/persons/etc. It insists upon a reality that can truly separate and distinguish one set of circumstances/conditions from another. And its great appeal is that precisely because it can do so, it permits a security, a certainty, of who/what/how/where one is in relation to these separate dualities.

Now, my own experiences of Woolf's "shocking" moments - and those of people with whom I've talked about such things - is that they challenge this vertical dualism and, instead move us, initially, towards a more **horizontal dualism**. In which case, the clear-cut divide between the dualised elements can no longer be so. Instead, we have moved toward a sort of unified polarity.

The shift is from separate opposites to complementary positions.

male----- female  
good----- bad  
right----- wrong  
perpetrator----- victim  
privileged----- disadvantaged

But, there is more, I think. The shift towards the horizontal leads initially towards a duality which is not only far less inflexible than that of the vertical duality, it is much more "fluid" in that it no longer permits any total separation between the polar extremes.

In turn, this "shocking" awareness shines a light of responsibility on all manifestations in that no clear-cut separation of responsibilities (or anything else) is any longer possible.

Ultimately, I think it challenges the very notion of dualisms. But that is another matter.

For now, we can see that the shift towards the horizontal is a shift towards a fluidity that challenges vertical notions of responsibility that can be delineated and divided into statements such as "my responsibility versus your responsibility" and so forth. Instead, each manifestation becomes responsible for all manifestations. "I am responsible for everything", in other words.

Now this is where the horizontal shift takes on its revolutionary implications - but, it must also be said that the response to such implications is not usually a positive one. Not least because there is



always the danger that its implications are open to an abuse that fundamentally re-interprets the horizontal stance from the perspective of a vertical one in order to maintain authoritarian power. Sadly, this all too obvious in both Right and Left political/social movements. The current "trans wars" between the "binaries" and the "fluids" are just one example of this. Which, again, might be another discussion. But, in general, in being willing to address the sorts of issues that we have been discussing from a horizontal perspective, we implicate our selves within the issue under discussion. We can no longer be separate from it in that vertical sense. As such any statements made regarding the issues have their personal constituent. We have to own the statements in the sense that we are there in every part and aspect of their concerns and challenges. This is not an easy set of circumstances for us to take on board. Not least as their exploration can be "shocking" in what they might reveal.

Much of the unwillingness to accept the implications of the horizontal shift arises, I think, from our interpretations of "responsibility". Again, they are typically interpretations based upon a "vertical" perspective rather than a "horizontal" one. Quite a few years back, I came across an attempt to define responsibility from a more horizontal perspective. Here's what it said:

"Responsibility starts with the willingness to experience yourself as cause.

It starts with the willingness to have the experience of yourself as cause in the matter.

Responsibility is not burden, fault, praise, blame, credit, shame, or guilt. All these include judgments and evaluations of good and bad, right and wrong, or better and worse. They are not responsibility. They are derived from a ground of being in which self is considered to be a thing or an object rather than context.

Responsibility starts with the willingness to deal with a situation from and with the point of view, whether at the moment realised or not, that you are the source of what you are, what you do, and what you have. This point of view extends to include even what is done to you and ultimately what another does to another.

Ultimately, responsibility is a context - a context of self as source - for the content, ie, for what is."

I don't know who wrote it, but was part of the "est" manifesto.

I think it is a deeply challenging "shock". And, deeply relevant to the concerns that trouble us and upon which this discussion focuses. But if we take such ideas to heart, what is our experience of such? What is our embodied response? For after all, we can only ask of others what we are willing to ask of our selves.

Over to you.

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Thanks for your reply Ernesto.

I agree, Woolf, like others, has discovered that distinction between "being and becoming", "the implicate order and the source", "the bodily implicit and the explicit symbols that arise from it" (Gendlin), "the ordinary and the illuminated absurd", and your own "worldview and worlding". In my own words I would say that what appears as objects in our world (or feelings in ourselves) are manifestations from a unified source. They all arise *from*, similar to waves arising from the sea; manifestations arise and fall from one common source, to which they remain connected. Maybe

more so, that the sea pushes itself to manifest as a further expression of itself. The bodily felt sense, for example, is always pushing for a point of view that carries my embodied being further along, yet its “point of view”, what it is pushing for, can be quite different from Greg’s point of view.

It feels as if I am inhabited by an anonymous more-than-personal intention that I later own as mine because it turns out to be more in my interest than I am. It is odd. But I can no longer think of the universe as an empty container full of living and dead objects. Reluctantly I have had to accept that the universe itself is alive and I am *its* manifestation and that, when I can set aside my ideas, concepts, ego, desires, and worries, it lives itself through me, palpably.

Your distinction between vertical and horizontal dualism is very helpful. I can see how vertical binaries help me to separate the world into poles that I can understand and situate myself alongside, tying myself to an objective reality that I can claim as certain. That makes me feel secure, unshockable.

The horizontal dualism allows both, poles we have created (discovered, recognised?) and a nuanced spectrum of reality between these poles. More fluid, more flexible. In this reality the responsibility falls upon me. I cannot claim ‘truth’, I can only approximate where I should take a stand and then constantly step this side or that and be accountable for these steps I take. It sounds like a return to individual accountability as an individual rather than as an instance of a category. But if so, then I could not quite get this step: “...each manifestation becomes responsible for all manifestations. "I am responsible for everything", in other words”. The deeper point, if I understand, is that horizontal dualism can’t even assert where the ends of the poles are... the binary itself dissipates into infinity.

Your description of responsibility as a “willingness to experience oneself as cause” certainly brings the ownership of action back to ourselves rather than actions being buttressed by, and prescribed by, a dualistic ideology that I take no ‘responsibility’ for yet act in the name of.

This implication of your assessment, “...you are the source of what you are, what you do, and what you have. This point of view extends to include even what is done to you and ultimately what another does to another”, would certainly be controversial to the left ‘social justice warrior’. I wonder what you would say to their obvious rebuttals?

What is our embodied experience of the shock of this version of responsibility? I can’t answer. I can feel the need for a more experiential description. What honestly comes to me is “I am not the source of what others do to each other, I am not responsible for the behaviour of Trump supporters clashing with Activists for Immigrant families”. I want to understand “responsibility is a context for self as source”. Do you mean that I am the vessel through which the source manifests itself and as that vessel I am charged with accepting my role as the cause of what is? I need more on this...

I can’t avoid wondering if, in this dialogue, we are repeating this world/worlding, explicit/implicit binary in our attempts to describe all this. Are we just creating new foundations on quicksand, standing on solid creations in order to pretend that we have some clarity?

Over to you Ernesto...

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Hi Greg

Your mention of the sea and waves reminded me of this stunning BBC documentary entitled "The Secret Life Of Waves". I don't know if you've ever seen it, but, if not, then it is repeated fairly regularly on BBC4 and might well be on iPlayer as well. It is really intelligent, informative,

challenging and deeply moving television. And... it comes "this" close to suggesting that all waves are expressions of "one wave" - including the 'waves' that we humans are.

Now, to clarify my point about "...each manifestation becomes responsible for all manifestations. I am responsible for everything, in other words".

You are right about the implication of this, which I've presented as "horizontal dualism", is just a way in to a realisation that the polarities ultimately dissipate. But I don't think that it's necessary to get this "ultimate" point in order to consider the shift from "vertical separatist binaries" to "horizontal polarities" as a useful and creative alternative to our more typical ways of experiencing our being with self and others in the world. I tried this out the other day at a Coaching Conference and people there "got it" right away. In terms of our discussion focus on the broad issues raised by "identity politics", I think that the shift I'm suggesting raises important implications - not least around questions of responsibility, victimhood, power and oppression. And, yes, I agree, that if we stay with this shift it would certainly have controversial implications that are not likely to be appreciated by all those who insist upon maintaining a "vertical" perspective. But there you go. Wasn't existential phenomenology meant to provoke and ruffle feathers? And wasn't it also meant to be a continuing challenge for those who claim to be its followers - rather than provide us with the supposed peace and security of "knowing better" and preaching the truths that will educate others to lead a better life? Anyway.... To the point:

Responsibility.

In the paper I wrote on relatedness (Spinelli, 2016), I noted that, in her novel, *The Blood of Others*, Simone de Beauvoir, borrowing from Fyodor Dostoyevski's *The Brothers Karamazov*, writes: "Each of us is responsible for everything and to every human being" (de Beauvoir, 1983: p 122). I tweaked this a bit so that it became: *Each of us is responsible for everything and to every being* (Spinelli, 2016: 325, italics in original).

It seems to me that such assertions are inevitable implications of what we existential phenomenologists might refer to as "being-in-the-world" or "relatedness" or "I/Not-I" or whatever the preferred term. In your response, you write "*In my own words I would say that what appears as objects in our world (or feelings in ourselves) are manifestations from a unified source. They all arise from, similar to waves arising from the sea; manifestations arise and fall from one common source, to which they remain connected.*" I agree with you entirely on this and it seems to me that in taking this view you are embracing this most foundational of all of existential phenomenology's points: *that each individual being is an expression or manifestation of Being. But, if so, the actions, behaviours, experiences, feelings, etc of every individual manifested being are relationally grounded in that Being. (Again, as you write: "Reluctantly I have had to accept that the universe itself is alive and I am its manifestation and that, when I can set aside my ideas, concepts, ego, desires, and worries, it lives itself through me, palpably".)*

*Here comes the implication: If we accept this, then there can be no true or genuine divide between "my" actions, behaviours, experiences, feelings, etc and any other being's actions, behaviours, experiences, feelings, etc. The vertical has become horizontal. I am who I am because of everything and everyone, past present and future.*

*If we now take this view and consider it within the terrain of "responsibility", then we are forced to the same conclusion: I can no longer speak of a sort of "my" responsibility that is boundaried within that which I (and you) identify as "my self". Equally, I cannot contrast that to "your" responsibility that is boundaried within that which you (and I) identify as "your self". That is only possible from a vertical axis perspective. Once we move to a horizontal axis, we recognise that even*

*within the (ultimately imaginary) dualities of "I" and "you", this "I" that I am and that "you" that you are exist along an inseparable horizontal polarity wherein "I" and "you" are "I/You", interweaving and co-influencing and always co-present in any statement that can be made about either "I" or "you".*

*Now, just as this horizontal polarity regarding I/You exists, then, implicitly, so must it also exist with regard to every conceivable I/You that is, has been or will be. And if that's so, then any statement I make about "my" responsibility, or "your" responsibility, or "the world's" responsibility is a statement that implicates and embeds each being that is, was or will be within that responsibility.*

*So, if we take all this back to the est statement about responsibility that I quoted in my previous set of comments, we can see that it's a statement that arises directly out of this horizontal shift in relational perspective. Maybe we can re-phrase the assertion that "...you are the source of what you are, what you do, and what you have. This point of view extends to include even what is done to you and ultimately what another does to another" to that of "...all beings are the source of what all beings are, what all beings do, and what all beings have. This point of view extends to include even what any being does and ultimately what is done to any being".*

*The immediate, practical implications of this are not easy to embrace. Indeed, our response is usually to return to a vertical stance. Which is fine, but you can't genuinely "mix and match". If you want relatedness, you have to really give up on the vertical and embrace the "shocking" implications of the horizontal.*

*Personally speaking, a lot of my qualms and concerns surrounding humanistic approaches is that they typically do attempt to "mix and match". They want the relational but within a vertical axis. So while they talk about "figure/ground" (which is as good a term for what we're talking about here as "being-in-the-world" or whatever is), they then have a tendency to speak of the "figure" (ie. the self) as though it can be understood, "made authentic" and which exists in isolation, outside of the context of the "ground" (ie. Being, which includes all beings). In this way, responsibilities get vertically divided into "mine" and "yours". But this seems to me to be a huge error that makes no sense whatsoever - except for its "self-protective" role.*

*I raise this point because I think that the broad humanistic stance has been taken on board by the various "social justice warriors" that present themselves in today's news and social media. They want to reject any idea of a horizontal axis responsibility because then they can no longer simply be the victims who "have been done to". Equally, they imagine that any horizontal form of responsibility assuages the guilt and shame of the perpetrators/privileged. I can see their concern but I would argue that this conclusion isn't the only possible one to arise as an outcome. The South African Truth and Reconciliation process, for example, hints at a more horizontal view of responsibility, with quite dramatic consequences. Were we to really be willing to consider the many dividing points that currently limit so many relations and interactions between us all - personally, socially, culturally - from that horizontal responsibility perspective, I would guess that the lived experience of guilt and shame (and whatever else) would be intensified rather than reduced and would encompass all of those involved rather than single out and separate. I also think that it would bring about genuine desired action that reduces the continuing likelihood of the many abuses of power and privilege that exist. Again, think of the impact that the current Grenfell Tower inquiry is having regarding notions of responsibility - how that mutually experienced and acknowledged responsibility, from the fire fighters, the police, the neighbourhood, those who lived there, is affecting one and all with determination, solidarity and so forth.*

*So, when you write: "I am not the source of what others do to each other, I am not responsible for the behaviour of Trump supporters clashing with Activists for Immigrant families", I have to*

*respond that, from this horizontal relatedness stand-point, yes "you" are, as "I" am, as "we" all are. And were we to see it that way, I'm betting that it would empower us, rather than cut us off. Not least because taking on the responsibility that comes with self as source (and all selves as source) touches us in ways that provokes that manifest bodily felt sense of re-connection to that one common source to which all beings are connected. As you write: "The bodily felt sense, for example, is always pushing for a point of view that carries my embodied being further along, yet its "point of view", what it is pushing for, can be quite different from Greg's point of view." The horizontal notion of responsibility that I'm arguing for here is precisely that "point of view that carries all embodied beings further along".*

*Over to you.*

*Ernesto*

### References

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Dear Ernesto,

Apologies for the delay in responding. Partly I have been pondering your comments, partly life has intervened. But I am sure you won't hold me responsible for the tardiness of my reply! And a warning that as the topic deepens, so my comments lengthen to try to wrap around this new complexity.

It is interesting to me that we can agree so substantially and yet arrive at quite different conclusions... If I put your argument into a very small nutshell, I think it is this: *The 'life source', or whatever we want to call it (let's have lots of names not just one), that lives through us as 'being' or 'worlding' or just 'life', is the expression of this horizontal point of view wherein we are all responsible for each other partly because we are not separate beings. If we were to accept that, live from it, we would become much more empowered to feel our commonality, and dare I say it, be more compassionate to one another.*

Is that what you'd say if you only had a nutshell?

I think you are right when you say, in your previous reply, *"Responsibility is not burden, fault, praise, blame, credit, shame, or guilt. All these include judgments and evaluations of good and bad, right and wrong, or better and worse. They are not responsibility. They are derived from a ground of being in which self is considered to be a thing or an object rather than context"*. I can certainly feel the pull to attribute responsibility as a cover for blame or fault, usually fuelled by anger or fear. And it does imply a view of the other as a subjective unit, or as an object of my separate perception. I fall into this despite knowing it is a superficial reality.

If 'you' and 'me' are not seen as vertical binaries, then can we say that responsibility is implied *in the situation* and that this situational context makes us who we are together; this is the source out of which we act, with responsibly to the situation, not to a separate self?

But then in that passage you go on to say, “*that you are the source of what you are, what you do, and what you have*”. In order to avoid the sound of returning to binaries of self/other, could we say it this way, ‘the source is within whatever you are, whatever you do and have, it possesses you, acts through you as an energy that is not your creation but in fact creates you’?

I am taking a break now to watch the documentary *The Secret Life of Waves*. The first few minutes really pulled me in and I suspect will help me in our discussion.... Interesting viewing. Waves are made of energy, not water. And humans, though we may appear as objects, we really are more like waves, like energy. Very in keeping with Gendlin’s philosophy of process, we are all interactions all the way in and all the way down – ‘The person is an *Is-ing It* if it is an *It* at all’ (Madison & Gendlin, 2012).

In the documentary, I found the narrator’s discussion of his mother very moving. Despite the horizontal self/other *spectrum*, we still form self-other *identities* and create strong attachments to them. I think this is what we usually call ‘interpersonal relationship’ or even ‘relatedness’; first there are two and then there is this bond in between those two that we call ‘relating’. I know you mean something much more fundamental. You, if I understand (and this is also my view), challenge the ‘first there are two’ and only afterwards an ‘inter’. Perhaps an important point, which I will return to, is whether ‘expressions of ‘one wave’” as you put it, actually equates to a kind of ‘oneness’? I feel it is implied in your comments?

However, there was also an unargued-for assumption at the end of the documentary suggesting that we would not want to live forever, or for our parents to live forever, if the price would be there could be no more children. This bias in the documentary certainly needs some scrutiny. In *Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, Thomas Ligotti (2010) depicts a very different, anti-natalist view of humanity in keeping with Peter Wessel Zapffe and the Norwegian pessimists I studied 30 years ago. But that is another discussion...

I entirely agree with your stance, ‘... *on the broad issues raised by "identity politics", I think that the shift I'm suggesting raises important implications - not least around questions of responsibility, victimhood, power and oppression*’. Each of these factors you name (as examples) are on a spectrum ‘between’ us. Yet no one has all the power or all the oppression. There is an intricate interaction in each situation where these factors play out horizontally, not (only or primarily) vertically. But I think you are saying more...

So now to your main point, *Responsibility*:

You write, “*Each of us is responsible for everything and to every being*” (your tweaking of de Beauvoir’s statement). You agree with my ‘unified source’ statement and that the “waves arising from the sea” offers a good metaphor for the existential view, “each individual being is an expression or manifestation of Being”. However, then you state what you see as an inevitable implication of this:

“*the actions, behaviours, experiences, feelings, etc of every individual manifested being are relationally grounded in that Being*”. If by ‘relationally grounded’ you mean ‘are primarily interactive’, then yes.

Then you state: “*If we accept this, then there can be no true or genuine divide between "my" actions, behaviours, experiences, feelings, etc and any other being's actions, behaviours, experiences, feelings, etc. The vertical has become horizontal. I am who I am because of everything and everyone, past present and future*”.

Here I must take a slightly different turn, one that I think rescues individual responsibility (still re-thinking 'individual' as verb not noun) from the collective source, though that is not the reason for my turn. The reason is that I just don't think we live that way, and I think we don't live that way because experientially we feel both the deep relationality of being as well as the uniqueness of each individual manifestation – both are true. Here too there is a horizontal axis landing us somewhere between 'we are from one source' and 'we are individuals'. One way to put it might be (Gendlin and others have said this) 'saying we are not separate beings is not the same as saying we are all one'.

Here I feel there is a co-mingling of 'interweaving' and 'self' such that the individual is lost:

*I can no longer speak of a sort of "my" responsibility that is bounded within that which I (and you) identify as "my self". Equally, I cannot contrast that to "your" responsibility that is bounded within that which you (and I) identify as "your self". That is only possible from a vertical axis perspective. Once we move to a horizontal axis, we recognise that even within the (ultimately imaginary) dualities of "I" and "you", this "I" that I am and that "you" that you are exist along an inseparable horizontal polarity wherein "I" and "you" are "I/You", interweaving and co-influencing and always co-present in any statement that can be made about either "I" or "you".*

There seems to be an assumption that because each being has, or is, this anonymous source that this is all he or she is. I know, sadly, that it is all too easy to override this source within (or through) me. I can choose to ignore it and act against what it is pushing for. I can choose not to 'do the right thing' meaning, I always have the choice to turn against the flow. What is it 'in me' that overrides this source, turns against it, resists it, ignores it? There is the source and there is the resistance.

You go on to say, "you can't genuinely "mix and match". If you want relatedness, you have to really give up on the vertical and embrace the "shocking" implications of the horizontal". I think there actually is a spectrum here too, and it is there that we discover something less polarised than horizontal or vertical, in fact we find a middle that is itself the non-binary 'both and', where despite the foundational relatedness there also exists each unique individual, it's just that the individual him or herself must be re-thought as fundamentally interactive rather than as concrete and complete in itself. This individual is freshly made and *unfinished*.

The social justice warriors may have taken the vertical axis in a fundamentalist way, denying the 'shared' spectrum of the horizontal because it diminishes the potential to 'blame', 'call out', 'take down' specific others who can be scapegoated as behaving in such a way as to reinforce the same vertical binaries that are being insisted upon in order to accuse them. But paradoxically we re-enact the vertical axis if in response we were to conclude that everything is horizontal, creating once again the poles horizontal/vertical, rather than a spectrum.

"Were we to really be willing to consider the many dividing points that currently limit so many relations and interactions between us all - personally, socially, culturally - from that horizontal responsibility perspective, I would guess that the lived experience of guilt and shame (and whatever else) would be intensified rather than reduced and would encompass all of those involved rather than single out and separate". This point I agree with, I sense intuitively that there would be an increased humility that accompanies the recognition that we are waves from the same body, and that at least the 'other side' is acting out a potential that is implicit in all of us.

The Grenfell Tower example is a poignant one. Indeed, many involved in that disaster have expressed partial 'responsibility' for what happened, or did not happen, or the limited response they were able to summon on the night ... Then today on the news there was a 9<sup>th</sup> man convicted of fraudulently taking £80,000 support money he was not entitled to because he did not live in the tower as he had falsely claimed. I would like to see how you would apply your version of

responsibility to that concrete situation... (I understand your view as more profound than just 'we all are complicit in maintaining the cynical capitalist system of greed that this man is acting within'...).

Returning to my Trump example, I'd say that if I can take responsibility for Trump's actions, then I can also take responsibility for my own. If I can be held responsible for my own actions, then so can Trump. To some extent there remains a 'Trump' and a 'me' despite our common source. I might express this as: *At least to the extent that we contradict and deny the directionality of our common source, thus we make ourselves individuals with separate identities.* 'I' am responsible for creating myself as a vertical pole. However, if we are *guided by the horizontal*, the interaction between, the worlding, the living... Then what we are responsible to is the openness of interaction, not a discrete being. Obviously I agree with part of what you are saying as per my previous comments – "*because taking on the responsibility that comes with self as source (and all selves as source) touches us in ways that provokes that manifest bodily felt sense of re-connection to that one common source to which all beings are connected*".

I refer to a few comments from an article I wrote some years ago, grappling with the point I am trying to make above:

The meaning of my client's tight face is not as accessible to me as it is to him. It is only visible to me. Contrary to Merleau-Ponty, one person is experiencing the meaning of that tight face in a potentially accessible way. I could guess about my client's experience and be right because I potentially know my own experience of a tight face. But I could also be very wrong. I can have an intuition that carries a lot of truth. I can pick up an impression of what is "between" us. But the tightness does not fall in the "between." Its *effect* is there, shared, but its coming is in one of us.

It is a non-phenomenological assumption to think that the expression is shared, like it could have appeared on either face. *For some reason*, it appears on his face. It is tied up with *his* experience of the whole situation, his view of *our* shared present, past, and future interaction, crossed with *his* specific meanings. It is certainly not a pure subjective phenomenon. When he pays attention to his bodily experience, he will find what *saliencies*<sup>6</sup> in him are living in that situation. It is the outside, or the between, that his body crosses with its own perspective, including its forward implying. That brings the tightness *in him*. His tight expression is the implicit crossing of many multiple strands of past, present, and future interaction, intersubjective and individual. It is not *before* him as a perception. Although it is before me, it is also a part of my implicit situation, not just a perception. From both of us the session is capable of being sensed from "inside." Whether we are aware of it or not, this sensing *is* the session (Madison, 2001:14).

And then a few comments from an interview I published with Gendlin. These are notes that are slightly different from the published version. I think his points are relevant to our discussion here...

Madison: The life-forward that you're talking about, what actually *is* that? What is it that lives forward through us?

Gendlin: Well, we can say it like that but that's like saying where does living come from or where do *we* come from? Somehow it comes from *under*. Living that I know from the inside comes from under, which is like saying I don't know where it comes from but I can feel it coming. I can distinctly feel it and when I have no energy I can feel that degree of 'not-coming'. But as long as I'm still alive it keeps coming and forgiving all the things I did wrong, because it makes me all over again each minute, so it's a very distinct experience but it surely isn't clear. I can sense further down than I can understand, further than a felt sense because a felt sense is already a datum; it's already a something, so it goes lower than that and I don't know how far it goes ... all I can say is that it's very palpable. My 'don't-know' is not an agnostic don't know. It's not a religious don't-know either but it's closer to that because it's a very palpable universe for me, but only where I fade into it. I can't claim how far it goes or what it's all about.



Madison: OK, so when you have the experience of something carrying forward, that is an experience of ‘this living through you’?

Gendlin: It’s certainly an experience of the living. Of course, indirectly any living is this living through us, but that’s already hypothesizing an entity there. ‘It’ lives through ‘us’, and you don’t gain anything by doing that. You can call it god or the universe or the unknown, or the endless or anything you want to call it. Often, to save myself from false reverence, I say ‘I call it god or whatever the fuck it should be called’. And this takes care of any sort of over-reverence. I mean I’m reverent of it but not the way you would be in front of a king or a dictator. I don’t believe in that kind of treading softly. If it makes you smaller and weaker, it’s not right. . . . . Every life process, no matter how primitive, is some kind of environmental interaction. And by environmental interaction I mean something like what Heidegger meant by being-in-the-world except he didn’t have a body. . . .

Madison: What you said there just brought up another question for me. When your body releases because you’ve said something accurately enough, that is an example of carrying forward, shifting, typically feeling more expansive and less constrictive in some way, lighter, and that difference is palpable. [Gendlin: yes, absolutely] So, it’s almost as if the ‘it-that-is-ising’, knows the direction. Almost like it’s pushing for a particular way and when it gets it, it’s a bodily relief. [Gendlin: Yes, absolutely]. How does it know the way?

Gendlin: Well, it’s very complicated [laughter] and I’m not finished with it either. I don’t know if one can get finished with that question. But first of all let’s say it’s an ising and that’s how it is an *it* if it is an *it* at all. So it’s not the old kind of ‘it’ and perhaps it’s not any kind of ‘it’. And how does this ising know how to push for the right thing for me? [Madison: Yes]. In some cases it’s clear that this ising doesn’t know a unitised ‘oh that’s what it is’ because if you stay with the ‘that’s what it is’ then soon it turns out to be a process of steps you can trust. I wouldn’t trust any one spot along that process except that each spot along that line is necessary so that you can get further.

. . . It’s living for it’s own sake or living for living and it’s very stubborn that way too. I’ve often gotten mad because I’m concerned with getting a certain result in a particular situation and I go inside to pick up what I can sense about it and I look at my dreams, and everything in that process is concerned with *me* and *my* quality and *my* living forward and how am *I* living, and it annoys me that it doesn’t care about that situation like I do [laughter]. Instead it says ‘you’re not asking this right or you’re not being in the right mode’. And that’s all it seems to care about all the time. And it’s convinced that if I am in the right mode that somehow the situation will be OK. But *I’m* not sure of that. So yes to your question, it has it’s very own purpose, like Aristotle said about life, it’s always for it’s own sake.

Madison: Yes. Like it has it’s own self-interest. [Gendlin: Yes]. It’s an experience of life’s self-interest but not as an isolated entity and not abstract as though life was concerned about itself *in general*.

Gendlin: Right, not like that. Each creature, and that’s so peculiar too when you look at it, because you’ve got trillions of insects and each one is a whole story. But on the other hand there is also this mesh that is a kind of interplay between the society, the community, the relationship or the pair, somebody more than an individual. That context is bigger than the individual but the individual is also bigger than that context . . . I want values and choices to be at least in interplay with that deeper sense. I don’t think it’s an either/or. I think that when you are in touch with this process it affects the choices ‘you’ want, at least partly. So, there is a back and forth between those and we prefer it when they come out together but when they don’t then we have to deal with that. But I wouldn’t say you ever want just the one or the other. I would always have liked to be able to say, ‘I want whatever’s right’, which is a lot like the old tradition of ‘whatever’s god’s will, we’ll do that’. But there are times that god says, ‘no buddy, you can’t just shove it off on me. You’re on the scene and you know what’s going on. And you’ve got to make the choice, or at least you’ve got to make it in interaction with this ising process’ (Madison & Gendlin, 2012).

In order to make quite a different point than we are making here, Thomas Ligotti quotes from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1962), where Conrad employs a harrowing steamboat journey up a treacherous river to describe something of the human dilemma, 'When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality - the reality, I tell you - fades. The inner truth is hidden - luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me' (Ligotti, 2010: 207-8).

I would make the claim that I can ignore the 'source' within me and, from the smaller identity I have constructed, I can commit acts that I immediately feel as dissonant with the source that I fundamentally am. Yet I can still do it, and I am responsible for that, just as Albert Speer was the only defendant at Nuremberg to take personal responsibility for his actions ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuremberg\\_trials](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuremberg_trials)). He was right to do so, in my view. The social justice warriors entirely miss the deeper reality and see only the constructed vertical axis. That, I would say, is a motivated stance to stiffen against the humility that comes from living from the source... It implies a motivation to divide, and to pitch one side against the other; a motivation that I can easily sense into because I've been there - It knows me.

OK, too much, now over to you... Greg

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Hi Greg

I don't think that we are as far apart in our views as might initially be supposed.

I was very struck by your (and Gendlin's) statement: "we feel both the deep relationality of being as well as the uniqueness of each individual manifestation – both are true. Here too there is a horizontal axis landing us somewhere between 'we are from one source' and 'we are individuals'. One way to put it might be (Gendlin and others have said this) 'saying we are not separate beings is not the same as saying we are all one'".

I agree entirely with this point. Actually, more recently Manu Bazzano argued something similar in his critique of my relatedness paper (Bazzano, 2017). I think that the dilemma being raised here is that we can't really state anything about "the source" or "worlding" or "Being" because to do so brings our statement back onto the vertical. What such terms try to address is that which cannot be addressed in any direct fashion because to do so "thing-ifies" that which precedes, or is the source of "thing-ification".

Obviously, however, the fact that, through our lived experiences, we grapple with various ways with which to give voice to this source suggests some pre-conceptual access to it which we then make attempts to conceptualise. But, in doing so, we are forced into expressing matters in terms of dualities or polarities or some sort of other concept that attempts to break the boundaries of conception. An impossibility.

As such, the view that we are not separate beings needn't necessarily suggest a basic singularity, not least because singularity is also an attempt to conceptualise that "source". My guess is that this is what Gendlin is getting at (and as well again in the later passages of your discussion). He recognises that our attempts at clarification of this awareness of Being are just that - attempts. And that, more, they are failed - or fallen - attempts because they always lead us back to "some-thing".

I've often thought that this is the sort of "fallenness" that Heidegger goes on about and to which we tend to attach those dreadful terms authenticity/inauthenticity. Most psychotherapeutic interpreters translate these from the standpoint of a "self" (as in "authentic or inauthentic" self). But to place such terms within the confines of self (and an implicitly separate, non-relational self to boot) seems to me to go entirely against Heidegger's self/world relatedness argument. He puts it quite nicely, I think: "We are 'the be-thinged'" (Heidegger, 1971: 181). As I read it, Heidegger is reminding us that any self is already a thing-ified outcome of Being. Peter Gordon has also nicely addressed this point. He writes: "Authenticity is not a metaphysically distinctive way of being human; it is just a way of taking responsibility for what one has already been given" (Gordon, 2014: 27).

Actually, here's the Heidegger quote in full:

“If we let the thing be present in its thinging from out of the worlding world, then we are thinking of the thing as a thing. Taking thought in this way, we let ourselves be concerned by the thing's worlding being. Thinking in this way, we are called by the thing as the thing. In the strict sense of the German word *bedingt*, we are the be-thinged ones, the conditioned ones. We have left behind the presumption of all unconditionedness” (Heidegger, 1971: 181.)

Now *there's* a statement to grapple with on a solitary windswept beach while watching the waves come crashing in!

And maybe I am misreading the old futz, but it sounds to me that Heidegger is trying to express the very same issues that we are engaging with. He's asking us to consider our acts of thing-ification - be it of things or of beings and that, in doing so, we lose our grasp of the openness (unconditionedness) of Being. Or, at least, that's how I am reading it tonight. And, by the way, in his use of the term, "worlding" is more akin to "worldview" than to worlding as source-point/process/call it what you will.

Okay, now back to something hopefully more straightforward: The idea of the vertical and the horizontal is just another attempt to "point to" the source rather than truly capture it (as if such were possible). Our "thing-ifying" demands create a duality, or at best a polarity. But still they suggest two things, or states or ways of being. At a judgmental level, they provoke ideas of one being right or true and the other being wrong or false. But if we attempt to cut through the assumed duality/polarity we arrive at a view that is not so different to your own stated concern: they are not truly separate, existing in their own cocooned being. Exploring the vertical, after all, has been our "way in" to the horizontal. And when we attempt to grasp the horizontal we are, unwillingly perhaps, brought back to the vertical. As such, we might be willing to conclude that they both point us to "the source" in that they are both expressions of "the source".

If there is a difference in our thinking it is this: I would argue that once you have conjured up some notion of the horizontal we cannot ever return to a naive position that only considers the vertical. We can - and, of course, we do - return to vertical positions/stances/beliefs/biases but we can't really exclude that horizontal awareness that inhabits such stances. As you put it: experientially we feel both the deep relationality of being as well as the uniqueness of each individual manifestation - both are true. I agree with you. But what I am adding to this is something obvious: once you've

acknowledged both, you cannot really return to either one as though it existed in and of itself. Emphasising one does not erase the other. Actually, I would suggest quite the opposite. So when you write that there is the source and there is resistance, I would again agree. But the very fact that there is resistance is also an implicit acknowledgment of that which you are resisting. The resistance itself illuminates the source. So even when I act/experience from that separatist vertical axis, as though I have "forgotten" the source, my actions actually reveal how I am being with the source - namely, by attempting to convince myself and act in ways that suggest that I am unaware of its presence.

And what is it in us that seeks to deny or override? My guess is that it is to a large extent a cultural demand, in that differing cultures show varying degrees of overriding. We wouldn't survive very well or for very long in this Western culture of ours if we did not emphasise the vertical. But, equally, what we are increasingly seeing happening in so many different arenas is the slowly dawning recognition of how dangerous it becomes when *only* the vertical is acknowledged and valued.

Is there any step to take toward a solution? I think that you put your finger on it: it's just that the individual him or herself must be re-thought as fundamentally interactive rather than as concrete and complete in itself.

Again, I agree with you. It's not a case of "either/or" but of "both/and". The source and the individual co-exist in the sense that we conceptualise a co-existence. It's all we can do. What actually "is" lies beyond our conceptual scope. But if we at least attempt to hold on to the tension of individual/source then even when we are asserting our individuality in some way or other we can also recognise that this act, this identity, this individual co-exists with (or, for me preferably, is an expression of) that source that is the basis of all individuals. Again, we don't need to see this as some unity or unifying process. Doing so is just one way of trying to grasp conceptually what's being pointed to. But it's just another finger pointing to the moon rather than the moon itself (to use a somewhat hackneyed allusion and one that still ends up "thing-ifying" the "no-thing").

And this, hopefully, begins to address your concerns surrounding individual responsibility.

I remember a scene in the film version of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* where we start with the bombing of Dresden, then backwards to the bombs being loaded onto the airplanes, then backwards again to the manufacturing of the bombs, then further back, and further some more and then still even further until it becomes obvious how the bombing could only have taken place with the complicity of just about everyone. And here is Gordon's statement again: "Authenticity is not a metaphysically distinctive way of being human; it is just a way of taking responsibility for what one has already been given" (Gordon, 2014: 27). It's that taking on board "what has been given" bit that seems to me to be at the heart of responsibility. It's not about directly acting with the view that you intend to do something like create a bomb, but it *is* the acknowledgement that your actions, whatever they may be, however seemingly disconnected they may be to such actions as making and dropping bombs, contribute to "what has been given" and, in this sense, you are responsible for the bomb's destructive existence. Just as you are responsible for everything.

But perhaps this may be close to what you are arguing regarding a situational context. But I'm not entirely clear as to what you mean by the term. Expand, please.

So... About the man who defrauds £80,000. Again, you're right. It's not just a stance of responsibility that points out how 'we all are complicit in maintaining the cynical capitalist system of greed that this man is acting within'. There is that element, of course. But what the view I'm proposing would suggest is that from a truly relatedness standpoint which embraces the

horizontality inhabiting all vertical experiences of being - namely, any and all vertical stances that I - or you, or anyone - takes even if entirely (apparently) unrelated to the defrauding man, or to the socio-political system we inhabit or whatever else forms part of the conditions of "what has been given". In this instance, the focus of "what has been given" is the fraudster. But it could also be "Greg who might sell his flat" or "Ernesto who is avoiding writing his second Private Eye novel" or whatever. The focus emphasises but does not separate that particular "bit" of "what has been given" from *all* of "what has been given". Just as, in the same way, the individual who stands out in the world does not stand out in non-relation to all other individuals. Seeing responsibility in this way, it seems to me, acknowledges that any vertical stance exists at least alongside the horizontal. And, if so, then responsibility enfolds all verticality and horizontality.

Now, when you speak of personal responsibility, the way that I would understand that would be that the more that I as an individual recognise the inseparability of my individuality to "the source", then it becomes more nauseating to me (to borrow from Sartre) to recognise what I do and how I claim to be when I deny that awareness and imagine that only the verticality exists. In response, I might try to alter my way of being vertical so that it both more adequately acknowledges and approaches the source horizontality. But when I do that, the angst of recognition as to how my fallenness resonates with the fallenness of any other being who denies that very same awareness hits me full force. So, for example: Yesterday, I heard on the news that on average now company directors are earning salaries that are 145 times the salaries of their employees. I was furious and sickened by this. To believe that what they do is worth 145 times what any of their employees does just seems so revoltingly perverse to me. And what it does is emphasise a view that excludes any horizontality in the vertical stance being taken by both the company directors and their employees. And, by so doing, who knows what horrendous consequences might emerge - like, perhaps, the dropping of bombs on civilians, or the building of shoddy bridges in Italy. Okay. But now comes another nauseating recognition. I rail against the company directors from a vertical stance that, because it is concentrating on our on-going discussion, also acknowledges its embedded horizontality. And when I do that, the spotlight falls on that vertical me who, as an individual, takes it for granted that what he earns in an hour is the equivalent of somewhere between 10-20 times what some basic-pay worker might expect to earn. And is that not also nauseating? Yes, I believe it is. And that, for any number of reasons, I in my verticality choose to do nothing about that - is *that* not also nauseating? Yes, it is. And part of that nausea is because I can't distance my self quite as much as I might claim to from the company directors' earnings. I and they are much more aligned than my horizontal awareness would have expected or prepared me for. This alignment is not just complicity, or the capitalist system. It's that responsibility that arises with the acceptance of "what one has already been given". Which includes, me, the company directors, their employees, and everyone else you care to add.

Now, I am guessing that what I've just written isn't a million miles away from what you wrote:

Returning to my Trump example, I'd say that if I can take responsibility for Trump's actions, then I can also take responsibility for my own. If I can be held responsible for my own actions, then so can Trump. To some extent there remains a 'Trump' and a 'me' despite our common source. I might express this as: *At least to the extent that we contradict and deny the directionality of our common source, thus we make ourselves individuals with separate identities.* 'I' am responsible for creating myself as a vertical pole. However, if we are *guided* by the horizontal, the interaction between, the worlding, the living... Then what we are responsible to is the openness of interaction, not a discrete being. Obviously I agree with part of what you are saying as per my previous comments - "*because taking on the responsibility that comes with self as source (and all selves as source) touches us in ways that provokes that manifest bodily felt sense of re-connection to that one common source to which all beings are*

*connected*".

Or do you disagree with my conclusion?

In any case, the "social justice warriors" as you rightly state, take "the vertical axis in a fundamentalist way, denying the 'shared' spectrum of the horizontal because it diminishes the potential to 'blame', 'call out', 'take down' specific others who can be scapegoated as behaving in such a way as to reinforce the same vertical binaries that are being insisted upon in order to accuse them."

How might this fundamentalist stance be challenged? Well, again, the other day I was reading a fascinating article about how the origins of the #MeToo movement lay in the attempts by very courageous low-pay women (often office and home cleaners, waitresses, hotel staff, house maids and so forth) to respond to the verbal, physical and sexual abuse they got from any number of people (mainly men, but not exclusively so). However, since the Weinstein and broadly Hollywood-focused scandals made the headlines, the voices of these women have been drowned out by those of much more "highly placed" women (personalities, actresses and the like). Nothing inherently problematic in that insofar as if it makes us all more aware of the existence of abusive behaviour, all the better. But I think that we are both agreeing that the messages being communicated have very little acknowledgment of any horizontality. They are, as you state, "fundamentalist vertical axis" accounts. How might a horizontal axis emerge? I think that one way might be if the more "highly placed" #MeToo proponents examined their ways of being with/relating to/acknowledging the low-pay #MeToo women who are also part of the movement. Might it be the case that a truthful examination of their vertical axis relational engagements with one another might induce something along similar lines to that nausea I was referring to above? I suspect it might - and not just for the "highly placed" parties. And even if, vertically, they chose to do nothing about it, would the awareness of that choosing not bring them just that bit closer to the being and the behaviours of those whom they rightly and justifiably accuse of intolerable abuse? Not that this moving closer excuses, minimises nor exonerates the abuses perpetrated and which they have suffered and have agreed not to stand for any longer. But rather that it would include their awareness of the horizontal axis. Or to put it another way: it might provoke the responsibility that arises with the acceptance of "what one has already been given". And with that, serve to challenge the vertical divide being imposed.

Would that be a possibility?

What is the resistance to such? I would say that the attempt to accept "what one has already been given" is painful. As Eliot puts it: "Human kind cannot bear very much reality" (Eliot, 2001: *Burnt Norton*, Part 1).

And one of those unbearable realities that human kind cannot bear - but applies all the same - is that when we are convinced that only the vertical axis holds, then that - or those - which constitute "the other" become just "things". And as just "things" we remove from them what Heidegger calls their "unconditionedness". But of course, there's the added catch: it is not only "the other" who becomes just a "thing" it is also the "thinging being" (that self) who is "be-thinged". And there again, if we were willing to see this, would be the "way in" to a more horizontal awareness and to the source of all.

But... To the practical. If any of this makes any sort of sense to you (and to me, come to that) then we are faced with the basic challenge posed by Mr Marx: "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it" (Marx, 1998, Thesis 11)

Can we challenge our selves with that question? Or is that too arrogant?

Over to you.....

Ernesto

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Dear Ernesto

OK, we are close, if not overlapping. Our dialogue forms a situation from which we are clarifying our own and each other's thoughts; is it an instance of horizontal communication? Are the thoughts 'in' us as individuals, or are we being *reconfigured* by the process of our back and forth?

I agree with you that any utterance referring to 'worlding' or 'the source' threatens to make vertical, or to *thingify* what is by nature process and mistakenly pinned-down as a thing. If we make clear that we are only 'pointing' or using language metaphorically, then maybe we are protecting the understanding of process... or as Gendlin used to write: '....' a space held open.

Yes, we grapple to express what is actually lived, palpable, and more than any concept. In fact, often if we find a concept that describes *it* closely, the experience is affected by this description and we need to then say more, and more - the languaging becomes as much a living process as the lived experience it is attempting to describe, they move along together affecting each other. I wouldn't say our 'attempts at clarification' are necessarily 'fallen' except if we expect them to explain rather than temporarily describe what they point at ... The description is unfinished because life is unfinished.

Your comments about authenticity make me think again that authenticity is not an accomplishment or state of being but rather a particular quality of process. I like your reading of Heidegger and the implication that 'we lose our grasp of the openness' when we make things, units, objects, out of process, interaction, worlding. Again, it brings me back to our initial question about Identity Politics. The thingification of class, gender, race, etc. Of course, the counter-argument is that the majority 'class' does thingify the minority, 'underprivileged' group. But the question to my mind is what is our response to questions of privilege, hierarchy, discrimination? Is it to appeal to 'the common humanity', the source that we 'are', or is it to appeal to 'common enemies' and to shame, attack, create opponents out of 'the other' who is objectified as an 'oppressor'?

I think the more 'straightforward' point you are making points out the importance of our relation to language, what do we expect from it and to what degree are we mesmerised by it? I am continually shocked at how quickly a metaphor becomes a fact in psychotherapeutic discussions. The 'as if' quality becomes an 'is' relation. Always.... within minutes often...

I think you rightly point out the pitfalls of conceptualising what is beyond concepts: *“The source and the individual co-exist in the sense that we conceptualise a co-existence. It's all we can do. What actually "is" lies beyond our conceptual scope. If we at least attempt to hold on to the tension of individual/source then even when we are asserting our individuality in some way or other we can also recognise that this act, this identity, this individual, co-exists with (or, for me preferably, is an expression of) that source that is the basis of all individuals”*. And I think you hint at the way out - we don't start with concepts, we start with lived experience and from there we realise we are moment-by-moment arising freshly in specific ways, processing the situation we are interacting within, as a part of it, a creation of it. Conceptual attempts to grasp all this, should, in my view, also be expected to remain *in process*, never conclusive, but always checking to see which formulations touch the experience we are describing and which don't. Concepts that participate experientially have more validity I would claim, at least in that moment when they resonate. The next moment they may fall dead and new explorations are needed.

I like your discussion of responsibility and Gordon's view of authenticity, *“Authenticity is ... just a way of taking responsibility for what one has already been given”* (Gordon, 2014: 27)”. It is a quality of responsiveness in the situation. Though I would still shrink from fully accepting *‘you are responsible for everything’*. That is because I feel there is a distinction between *taking responsibility* for what has happened and your *quality of responsiveness* to what has happened. It feels complex to me and I would make a plea for a 'situational ethic' if we take that to mean some degree of felt sensing in each specific happening. This is why I keep wanting specifics and concrete examples ... *“Seeing responsibility in this way, it seems to me, acknowledges that any vertical stance exists at least alongside the horizontal. And, if so, then responsibility enfolds all verticality and horizontality”*. Yes, I agree with this and with your statement that the focus we take in a situation is not determined, nor perhaps arbitrary, but always expresses meaning and I would say, is the beginning of *symbolising* the situation.

So again, the question for me is whether that 'lifting out' a specific, that symbolizing from the whole (focusing on the £80,000 fraudster in my example), resonates with 'what one has been given' or not. There is not just one way to 'frame' a situation but that doesn't mean just any old framing is equally resonant. As I said from my previous response, *“If 'you' and 'me' are not seen as vertical binaries, then can we say that responsibility is implied in the situation and that this situational context makes us who we are together; this is the source out of which we act, with responsibly to the situation, not to a separate self?”*

And yes, I agree with your discussion of the nauseating pay gap and that we cannot distance ourselves from 'the other' as much as we would like to in order to safeguard our vertical identity. But let's move on...

I'm glad we are finding a way back to the social justice warriors through your discussion of #MeToo. I notice a hesitancy in me to join the discussion - here we are, two men, taking a somewhat critical view of #MeToo. You know that the first accusation will be of 'male privilege', a position that allows us to pontificate about a movement aimed largely at women's liberation from 'toxic masculinity'. Our identities will be reduced to gender (in this case) partly because it undermines any 'responsibility' by the accusers to consider the uncomfortable shift from vertical to horizontal. So, what is *my* responsibility in *their* (imagined) response? I do sense that I have a part in maintaining the power and privilege of men and have at times knowingly colluded in not challenging that inequality. I also can feel the impulse to control others (though not generally gender-based) and have not infrequently colluded in my own abuse by others rather than take a stand that required more courage than I could muster.



I do not feel so separate from the experiences of abuse described in the #MeToo movement or from guilt in response to the accusations of privilege. There is a sense that separating into gender-based accusations misses a deeper human complicity that is uncomfortable and requires careful step by step elucidation. Much easier to stand at one pole and cast sinister accusations at the other pole (that was constructed partly for that purpose). I think it is that act of being objectified (made into a 'thing' as you say) that is so objectionable.

So, you end with a line that was also forming in my mind as I read through your response - we are both left wondering, OK, so how to change the world then? How do we return to the complexity without watering down the potential for change? But what kind of change is wanted? What kind of world do we want?

The advance of "Intersectionality" as an analysis seems hopelessly confused. As an attempt to complexify our various 'identities', the intersections are not often enough between privilege and oppressed in the same person. It still maintains the gross oversimplification of *privilege vs oppressed* as if we are not all of us, both powerful and underprivileged. Like the Hollywood actress you site, who has been oppressed by male movie moguls but who in turn earns 147 x the salary of the woman who cleans her house... Then the confessions of guilt, and the artificial 'making space' for other voices. Somehow it perpetuates the power imbalance and the binaries that support it.

Ironically, many of the 'social justice warriors' who insist on the 'vertical' view of other, are critical of the inequalities inherent in 'neo-liberal' economics. Yet, Thomas Teo's argument (2018), could suggest that the aggressive tactics of these 'warriors' reinforce a neo-liberal form of subjectivity (NLFS):

*"While [William] James (1890/1981) was still able to distinguish a Self and a pure Ego, with the former addressing material, social, and spiritual dimensions, the distinction between the two has been disappearing in neoliberal contexts (a similar argument could be made for Mead's I and me, 1934). In a unique reduction of the self, the NLFS has given up on the idea of a transcendental ego, and instead concentrates on "myself" (self and ego) as a source for being in a neoliberal world. More precisely, the pinnacle self is achieved, when "I" not only have an instrumental, entrepreneurial relationship to the "self," but "myself" is an entrepreneurial entity. A good example, as reported by Heller and McElhinny (2017) in their analysis of brave new selves, is the statement by the American artist Jay-Z: "I am not a businessman, I am a business, man" (p. 242). It is also an example of how Spranger's aesthetic form of life has given way to a neoliberal form of life, which has become life itself" (Teo, 2018: pg 5).*

The NLFS (neo-liberal form of subjectivity) is "thoroughly individualized or psychologized", yet this psychologisation is not just evident in the harnessing of individuals for economic utility. Ironically, I think we find an inherent contradiction and hypocrisy on the 'radical left': This vertical view of an 'individual' is also needed to create a reviled enemy, an oppressor, while providing the warrior with a kind of "self-promotion" (Teo, 2018: pg.6). Thereby, it perpetuates the same conditions that social justice is supposed to eradicate. Often, I have seen this unholy contradiction in action on Facebook where someone uses the spotlight for self-promotion while professing to stand for social justice, equality, 'fighting for the oppressed' yet perpetuating the deep neo-liberal structure that requires oppression. "Social justice warrior" is one more marketing of self, making self into both a product and a consumer, threatening nothing more than the common humanity of a more horizontal stance.

So, can a more ‘horizontal’ view of self/other provide a method for addressing inequality and injustice without resorting to the objectification/ thingification we see in the binaries of identity politics?

I refer back to my comment at the beginning, how our language is metaphoric yet we, even in psychotherapy, tend to make it concrete and conclusive. We lose the ‘as-if’ quality: It’s *as if* she didn’t want me, it’s *as if* the power is in his hands, it’s *as if* I’d rather die than admit I’m racist... Keeping the as-if quality of metaphor protects a space for other interpretations. It accepts that it is not the only truth and that its perspective is likely transitory. In the next moment it’s as-if something else... This is the use of language to resonate with the source, not to conclude the facts that we can then impose as truth on everyone else. So, to change the world do we need to become poets rather than warrior- activists? Perhaps, at least to a degree, a kind of poetic thinking. I’d argue we do need art – film, fiction, community installations, social arts projects .... In order to access this more-than-conceptual and more than vertical thinking.

In *Radical Knowing* (2005) Christian de Quincey claims “The quality of my consciousness is the quality of my relationships... Relationship is all about consciousness. And consciousness is all about relationship” (pg. 9). He writes of a ‘pre-conquest’ consciousness, “characteristic of the minds of indigenous peoples, and ‘Post-conquest’, typified by modern rationalism. “Pre-Conquest” consciousness is rooted in feeling ... a form of luminal awareness hardly recognised in modern scholarship.” (pg.28).

*“Pre-conquest consciousness aims not for abstract truth but for what feels good. Individuals in such societies are highly sensitive to changes in muscle tension in others, indicating shifts in mood. If others feel good, they feel good... Post-conquest consciousness is radically different. Based upon dialectical reasoning, it intrinsically involves domination or conquest: A thesis is confronted and “conquered” by its antithesis... By its very nature, then, dialects, rational, post-conquest consciousness is confrontational”* (pg.28)

I think de Quincy has elaborated beyond our preliminary discussion. He says that reason does not need to dominate and decimate feeling but it does so when it is cut off from its roots in the wisdom of the body, or as we have been saying, the spectrum that includes the source. We have lost the way to a kind of thinking that is integrative, non-oppressive, that values what is right about the other position, not just what is wrong with it,

*“If anything, wisdom is integrative, whereas much philosophical truth is fragmentary - that is, it is either confrontational or it tries to separate and compartmentalise different subdisciplines. But philosophy doesn’t have to be this way. We can have “integrative philosophy”* (de Quincy, 2005: pg. 37).

Is there a way to convey and experiment with this mode of thinking and philosophizing? I have always wondered what role, if any, could an existential-phenomenological view have in the arena of social-political-community life. Maybe this is it?

Over to you Ernesto.

Greg

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Hi Greg

Yes, I agree that we are probably converging.

Your points reminded of something I'd written at the very end of the first edition of *The Interpreted World: An introduction to phenomenological psychology*, 'way back in 1989:

Ultimately, on a broader level, the 'doing' of phenomenology must have significant impact on one's life in general and one's relationship to the world. It does not take much to realize that, although our age is characterized by its multiplicity of advances in science and technology, both nations and their individual members remain so divided by their beliefs and attitudes that the very existence of all living things has come under serious threat of annihilation.

If each of us were willing to apply the phenomenological method to the various private and social interactions in our lives, if we were all momentarily to bracket our sedimented outlooks and beliefs in an attempt to enter each other's frameworks of being with mutual openness and respect, we would be likely to find that highly similar elements of concern and fear underlie our separate and seemingly antagonistic actions. Under such circumstances, although the many and varied problems of the world would not be instantly resolved, we could at least begin to disassemble many of the barriers that stand in the way of such a goal.

In shifting from an 'I or you' position to one which provides for the consideration of 'I and you' options, we would set into motion a major revolution in all forms of social behaviour, ranging from small group interactions such as contained within the family and pair-bonding, to the workings of industry, education, welfare, government and, ultimately, to the interactions between nations.

Without doubt, such changes require us to shift our philosophical and psychological assumptions. My personal conviction is that, should it ever come about, this revolution would be, in its broadest sense, one dependent upon *phenomenological* insight (Spinelli, 1989: 192).

Re-reading this passage I was struck how, in many ways, all of my contributions to our dialogue have been basically repetitions and (slight) expansions on this view. It is a little disturbing to find that almost 30 years later I am still grappling with the implications of this insight. But, perhaps, it is also a little bit reassuring that I continue to do so.

Anyway... I'm going to argue that what I take from the quote above refers back to the points you have been raising and specifically to the question of political implications. It seems to me that if we are genuinely concerned with attempting to embody some sort of existential phenomenological stance then we are necessarily living in a political world. I suppose that we could make a distinction between "Politics" and "politics" in that the former is a direct immersion into the systems and policies of political parties while the latter is typically outside or on the fringes of such and may

involve anything from personal or small group action or actions that are focused upon a particular issue or concern to a broad, general way of existing (or trying to exist). I don't see such involvements from an *either/or* perspective, but rather from a *both/and* one, though the two may at times be at loggerheads.

On a personal level, over the past few years (since Corbyn and Brexit mainly) I have tried to bracket my life-long antipathy to "Politics" and have joined a Party in order to engage with and influence in what ways I can (however limited) the focus and direction taken by, in this instance, the Labour Party - not least with regard to its stance on Brexit. This has often been a time-consuming and discouraging enterprise, but I stick with it for now and keep telling myself (or is that deluding myself?) that some change is noticeable. The problem with the "Political", as I experience it, is that it insists upon adopting what we have termed in previous sections of this dialogue as a *vertical* stance towards person/planet issues in that there are the good (Labour Party) and the bad (just about every other Party) and that a clear-cut demarcation between the two must always be maintained. I have very rarely found in any "Politics" something that even begins to resemble a willingness to adopt a *horizontal* stance. Perhaps, the one arena where such has been noticeable is when Cross-Party committees are constituted and, in a few cases, their conclusions extend beyond pure Party lines and reflect a stance that seems more enfolding and relevant (I'm thinking, for instance, about the Committee that investigated media abuse of personal data and which came up with significant conclusions - only to have most of them quashed by "Political" agendas).

At the "political" level, I would say that the most personally interesting and significant activity I've engaged in over the last couple of years has been focused on providing free individual, couple and group existential therapy to residents of one of the poorest Estates in South-East London. The people who have made use of this have been extremely therapeutically-naive. And, more to point, the primary dilemmas and concerns they face are social/financial/basic existence dilemmas that no amount of therapy is ever going to be able to resolve. Even so, discovering that one has a voice, that expressing views and ideas isn't necessarily dangerous (though it still can be) and that one is not quite so isolated in one's worldview has had a significant interpersonal impact on many of these people's lives (as well as mine). It's not enough; not *near* enough. And the frustration that that awareness provokes is sometimes all too unbearable for the therapists and clients alike. And yet....

So, what am I trying to say? If I go back to my 1989 conclusion I can see that the challenge to shift from *either/or* to *both/and* is a very similar challenge to that of attempting to shift from a *vertical* stance to a *horizontal* one. In fact, it may just be the same thing. So let me explore some of the issues here.

Imagine belonging to, or identifying yourself with, what has been labelled as a minority or oppressed group in our culture. Maybe because you are labelled (or self-label) as: black, Muslim, Jewish, LGBT+, disabled, female - whatever. All your adult life you have been fighting for/promoting views that centre upon social equality, acceptance, recognition. And, truth be told, in most of those instances, a noticeable forward movement towards all those aims and aspirations has taken place. All well and good. But what has also likely occurred is that through that labelling (be it by others or self or mutual) a strong *either/or* or *vertical* stance has rooted itself in how you/your group both identifies itself in relation to others and how others identify you/your group in relation to themselves. What will it take to shift to *both/and* or *horizontal*? In brief, what I think cannot be avoided is the loosening - if not letting go of - that very indentifying label that has defined you, that perhaps has strengthened and sustained you - as well as disenfranchised you - from the dominant - or shall we say privileged - perspective of the other. At the same time, this privileged other must also be willing to loosen or let go of the rooted identity that defines that other in contrast to you/your group. How willing are we all to attempt this? How threatened are we by the far more uncertain labels and identities that a *both/and* or *horizontal* perspective requires? While I think that *ultimately*

such a perspective creates an extreme - perhaps unsustainable - fluidity, the willingness to attempt (and to engage with that attempt) rather than any permanent achievement is a sufficient - and realisable - challenge for us all. The uncertainty provoked by a *both/and* or *horizontal* stance is scary. AND I would hazard to say, also life-affirming and illuminating. It might also be fun.

What I think existential phenomenology can contribute to such an attempted enterprise is that its very impetus for existing as a system/method/approach lies in the fact that a *both/and* or *horizontal* stance is what fundamentally *defines* it (and yes, I'm aware of the paradox/contradiction in this - but there you go). At its best, it provides us with some tools/method/structure for attempting to express and embody a *both/and* or *horizontal* stance. I really and truly believe in this possibility.

But... Another dilemma: Let's say that you are a representative of a labelled minority and/or oppressed group. You have been fighting all your life for acceptance, equality, recognition and so forth. And you have suffered for this in all sorts of ways, as well as experienced the closeness and intimacy in being with others from that minority who have fought and suffered in their ways such that in very important ways a group identity has been formed around that minority/oppressed focus, be it religious, "racial", sexual orientation, gender, or whatever. Okay, so one day along comes someone to you/your group who is clearly *not* someone who has undergone the minority/oppressed life experience that you/your group have undergone but who, nevertheless, insists upon labelling and identifying him/herself with your minority. How receptive are you going to be to this someone? Especially if this someone's life experiences would be associated by your group, and by most groups, as those of a member of the dominant - or privileged - group? Imagine: an obviously Caucasian person claiming that their life experience and sense of identity is that of a member of the Afro-Caribbean community. Or, imagine: a transgender person claiming the right to represent the gender to which s/he has recently transitioned in some formal capacity, perhaps even making legal or political decisions affecting that group. Or, make up your own imagination possibility (though the two I've mentioned have and do continue to occur in "reality"). Here, again, I think, the *either/or* or *vertical* stance is all too likely to be maintained if not rigidified. Why? In most instances because those who have lived their lives from that minority/oppressed label, and who have come to self-identify (as well as be identified) through it, experience the acceptance of the newcomer as a threat to that identity. If anyone, coming from whatever set of experiences, can self-identify in *our* way, then what sort of identity do we actually have? If it is so fluid to potentially encompass anyone who wishes to claim it, then how far does it destabilize as an identity be it personal or interpersonal? And what does it do to the meaning of all the battles fought and almost won?

Again, I think that existential phenomenology has something important to bring to this side of the issue as well. Because, as I understand it - and you so correctly pointed out in a previous dialogue - if we truly seek to adopt a *both/and* or *horizontal* stance then we come to realize that such a stance does not/cannot deny/remove/split from an *either/or* or *vertical* stance but must in some way embrace/contain/permit such within its *both/and* or *horizontal* stance. Otherwise, it would become just another *verticality* claiming to be *horizontal*.

Again, the achievement is likely impossible; but the attempt remains more than worthwhile. But also scary. And uncertain. And?

In this second example instance, it raises at least three pivotal questions:

1. If the minority/oppressed group is to reject the claims of the newcomer that s/he is part of that group, then it is necessary for the group to actually specify what are its foundational conditions/requirements/definitions that would determine whether someone can/cannot be identified as a member of that group. Paradoxically, such an attempt might well generate a greater openness rather than closedness. I suggest you - anyone - try it. I suspect that in doing so, the essentialising of

those qualities or features that define will not be easy to accept. Indeed, the very attempt to come up with any such definition might not be easily achievable. And if it isn't? What then?

2. It starts to become apparent that the basis for the newcomer's assertion that s/he is a member of that minority group rests upon an isolationist/self-referencing stance - ie. I am who I claim to be because *I* say so. There is no acknowledgement of any relational context whatsoever in this stance. It is, in fact, an instance of the "dictatorship of the I" which has so dominated our culture and which has reached an extreme over the past few years - paradoxically through the influence of social media. We have reached a critical point where many of the dilemmas we have been discussing throughout have come into existence because of self-contained assertions in which something "is" because "I" (in my self-determined, isolationist, deparatist definition of "I") assert that it is. Nothing else, no other view or stance, has the validity that *my* view has.

3. If the newcomer examines his/her experience, s/he might realise that the assertion s/he maintains is dependent upon a stance that "feels itself to be x". But is "feeling oneself to be x" the equivalent of "being x"? Or is it all and always just "feeling oneself to be x" *for all of us*?

Again, I don't pretend to have any sensible or reliable answers to these questions/challenges (much less any others that might crop up). But, I do think that via existential phenomenology I have the means to explore and consider them in ways that don't instantly impose an *either/or* or *vertical* stance upon that exploration which, more likely, will close down that investigation. Instead, in attempting that *both/and* or *horizontal* stance it takes us to at least an initial position that is willing to consider the dilemma not from a dispassionate, seemingly objective viewpoint, but rather from an immersed/committed one which begins at least with that willingness to approach the issue of responsibility as one where all of us, all concerned, are entirely responsible for that which the issue brings forth.

If we think of these points in relation to the issues surrounding the divide between the privileged and the oppressed, and the consequent issues surrounding victimisation and so forth, the challenges being considered here initially destabilise such clear-cut *either/or* assumptions. At first, this might seem like a sort of giving in to the privileged other, almost an excusing of whatever oppressive stance or behaviour has been carried out and might continue to be carried out. And it would be that if it was a one-sided fluidity being proposed. It has to work both ways: the privileged oppressor must also be willing to attempt to stay with the stance of the oppressed. The mutuality of a *both/and* or *horizontal* stance is often missed because so many insist on examining it from an *either/or* or *vertical* set of assumptions. That's why, for all its limitations, the attempt made in post-apartheid South Africa shines as an example of an alternate possibility - whose very limitations and failures help us to identify more of what is necessary in order for a *both/and* or *horizontal* stance to become ever more adequate.

So, finally, with regard to the Political/political dimension, I would say that existential phenomenology provides us with a means with which to elucidate/open up/disclose that which imbues any Political/political stance. Is that valuable? I think so. And scary. And provoking of uncertainty. And (possibly) fun.

I've tried to explore some of these points at a personal level - mainly focusing upon my extreme negative reactions to those who voted to leave the EU as well as those who supported and continue to support Donald Trump's presidency. I'll say this much: it's been challenging.

Over to you

Ernesto

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Dear Ernesto

I resonate with and concur with, your *Interpreted World* quote from thirty years ago. Attempting to practice phenomenology must have an impact on one's life in general. But if it is meant to have an impact, why has it failed to do so and been so ignored at the broader level, the professional level, and probably the personal level? Even in humanistic and existential traditions, we run to adopt other theories at the drop of a hat. Phenomenology has been at best an irritant with the powers that be; NICE for example. And experiential practices that would invite a phenomenological awareness into the personal lives of existential practitioners remain sidelined if present at all in existential trainings. Why is phenomenology such an unpopular message? I think this becomes a galvanising question in this exchange...

When you write about our divided world and how a phenomenological approach might help breach the gulf between opposing views, I am reminded of a project I started a few years ago, *Map of Human Experience*. It is an attempt to make an 'experiential map' of a community or city, so that citizens could anonymously 'confess' their feelings, fears, dreams, secrets, and that these would be responded to by other citizens, and the anonymous submissions and responses curated and mapped across the city, projected onto sides of buildings, written up and displayed on large electronic notice boards at train stations, shopping malls, coffee shops and cathedrals. My guess, I think like yours, is that community is not based upon political opinions and ideas, but upon our experiential relating and that the shameful secrets we keep most private are actually the very points of contact where we would connect most deeply and movingly.

I think what I have written above speaks to some extent to your distinction between 'Politics' and 'politics', community projects being an expression of the small-p. It feels to me that political activity is more hopeful than Political activity as it conveys more directly our lived humanity. Though, I also suspect that both levels are equally necessary and increasingly interact with each other.

In terms of your suggestion that Politics is mostly vertical in its stance, I agree. A refreshing exception was the Green Party decision not to run candidates in any constituency where a progressive candidate from another party had a better chance of winning. The Liberal Democrats, at least in some constituencies, then followed suit. Labour, though they benefited hugely and elected MPs directly as a result of this 'progressive alliance', would not do the same and even ran a Labour candidate in Caroline Lucas's (popular Green Party leader) own constituency in Brighton, to the disgust of many local voters and previous Labour supporters. It was a bold move to take a horizontal stance, in a sense, to say we will work across party lines and make an alliance with others who share broadly progressive ideas regardless of affiliation. However, it remains vertical in that there was not an equal attempt to reach out to right wing conservative voters and initiate dialogues of understanding.

You and I have been, in our own ways, embarking on similar endeavours, yours offering therapy to a disadvantaged community in South-East London and mine to initiate a World Day of Listening. The WDoL involved setting up chairs on the street and listening to passersby and it took place in over 20 different countries. Free Therapy and Free Listening. Both projects are very different from attempts to convince or propagandise. We were not imposing a progressive (or conservative) agenda. We both trusted (I assume) that offering a receptive space was enough to invite the potential of effective change in peoples' lives, maybe in community action. Both our projects still had the distinction of 'the therapist/listener' and the 'listened to'. I would like a project that does not start

with this distinction.

You ask me to imagine belonging to a minority or oppressed group – no imagination required, though the word ‘belong’ might not fully capture the facticity of it. From childhood, I was occasionally labeled as, and eventually self-identified as: gay, homosexual, queer, non-heterosexual, non-straight, etc. Long before I understood what “sexuality” is. Though that does not mean I have been outspoken about, or ‘fighting for’, gay rights ‘my whole adult life’.

It is true that by all external parameters, progress has been made regarding the rights of sexual minorities such as myself. Years ago, most gay men and lesbians would enforce the vertical binary of gay/straight by denying the existence of ‘bisexual’. Likewise, the heterosexual community labelled anyone who was not essentially committed to heterosexuality as ‘queer’. Adhering to and promoting the label of ‘gay’ (for example) seemed to eventually achieve so-called ‘equal rights’, while the dilution of sexual labels now seems to assume that the achievement is complete. I, and some fellow older gay men, decry this fluidity as if it assumes that the fight is over. Personally, I feel *both/and*; *both* that there is a societal fabrication obscuring the continued prejudice/hatred towards minority sexualities *and* a personal desire to loosen the predictive ‘*straightjacket*’ that adopting a label determines who I am attracted to.

You write, “How threatened are we by the far more uncertain labels and identities that a *both/and* or *horizontal* perspective requires? While I think that *ultimately* such a perspective creates an extreme - perhaps unsustainable - fluidity, the willingness to attempt (and to engage with that attempt) rather than any permanent achievement is a sufficient - and realisable - challenge for us all”.

A few responses: 1. I don’t want to lose the social construct ‘gay’ and its political potential to challenge heteronormative life assumptions. 2. Yet I don’t *personally* want the rigid identity of ‘gay’. The spectrum-indicative term ‘non-straight’ fits better – it allows fluidity along the horizontal except for the rigid identity of ‘straight’ which does not describe me. 3. The discussion could be taken to assume that these are only social constructs. Life would have been much easier if I could have chosen my sexual desire but my natural desires possessed me more than I did them. And they were only a part of a living orientation that seemed to include all sorts of unconventional aesthetic, ethical and behavioural inclinations.

So, the question for me is how threatened is the larger community by fluidity in sexuality? How threatened am I? What are the political consequences, and most pertinently, despite the security of a label (even one that makes me despised) and the threat of non-labelling, my desires remain largely focussed towards men. Conceptually I can embrace fluidity yet experientially there seems to be an essential limit to the reality of my ability to *be* fluid. Desires that can still get me imprisoned or killed in many parts of the world if they are not concealed. Hiding a basic desire tends to create an identity even if only in opposition to one that excludes me. I can take a horizontal stance and you are right, it provokes a degree of uncertainty and opens up the question ‘to what degree was I imposing *only* same-sex attraction’ when I was actually able to express my sexuality more fluidly. But only somewhat more fluidly.

Phenomenology, for you, offers methods for attempting to embody a *both/and* horizontal stance. In your example of someone claiming minority status who has not suffered the minority experience (I have not encountered anyone claiming to be ‘gay’ who is not, quite the opposite) I don’t think it is the threat to ‘our’ identity that results in rejection of the newly-proclaimed gay man. I think it is the threat that this person dilutes the identity before the struggle for ‘equality’ is achieved. Yet, more and more, I feel that I do not want this struggle for ‘equality’ to be achieved. I do not want to lose the status of someone whose existence is subversive. I’m ambivalent about gay marriage; the domestication of the degenerate.



Phenomenology, I would argue, exposes us to the fluidity of all these rigidities. A rigid stance, when openly encountered without agendas to change it, does of its own accord begin to unfold or expand and often start to shift ever so slightly. This is exactly the process you suggest in your point number 1. The essence of the rigid stand becomes foggy. This of course, as you say, leads to point 2, where the dictatorship of the non-relational 'I' asserts its rights. It is not safe to become foggy when the 'I' is ready to pierce through with its individualistic demands.

I agree with the conclusions that an existential-phenomenological stance destabilises or deconstructs clear-cut binaries. Yes, this can seem like a giving-in, or a weakening of a position that might be more effective politically if protected in its sedimented form. You address this by saying the horizontalising must be mutual. And I wonder, in the dichotomy of privileged/oppressed, which side is more eager and which more resistant to loosening their hold? Is 'mutuality' the goal rather than the necessary precondition?

You would say, "existential phenomenology provides us with a means with which to elucidate/open up/disclose that which imbues any Political/political stance. Is that valuable? I think so. And scary. And provoking a state of uncertainty. And (possibly) fun. I've tried to explore some of these points at a personal level - mainly focusing upon my extreme negative reactions to those who voted to leave the EU as well as those who supported and continue to support Donald Trump's presidency. I'll say this much: it's been challenging".

You and me both.

Where do we take this then? I feel I want an action step. Is this something that the existential community might do to host the birth of 'existential activism'?

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Hi Greg

A couple of weeks ago, I was listening to Start The Week on Radio 4. They had this New York University professor, Jonathan Haidt, talking about how American universities had noted, across the board, that from the 2011-2012 intake onwards there had been a huge increase in student anxiety, depression and self-harm. Haidt went on to argue that he believes that this is likely due to fundamental shifts in assumptions/expectations by the generations who have started going to university since around 2011. These shifts can be summarised as:

1. the insistence that one must not be, or be seen to be, fragile in any way; The demand to feel safe and protected from anything that upsets surpasses everything else, not least questioning one's beliefs, debate and so forth.
2. the view that trusting one's feelings surpasses every other means of gauging truth/reality/what is appropriate, etc
3. the assumption that life is not about rightness and wrongness, but that it is a battle between good and evil.

I was quite intrigued by this account in the light of our discussions. I'm not entirely convinced by the specific shifts that he identifies but I am willing to go along with him with regard to the view that there has been a substantial worldview shift composed of various interwoven shifts regarding how to be and how to be-with others that has mainly affected the "millennial" generations in that the "instruments" utilised to generate these shifts are primarily through social media of different types.

I also think that many of the "pre-millennials" who have adapted to these social media have,

however inadvertently (or not) tended to employ them to galvanise discourse in ways that emphasise vertical dualisms. I may be wrong, but my sense is that those pre-millennials who most make socio-political use of, and rely upon, social media are precisely those who feel most devalued, disenfranchised, dismissed, and generally alienated from or left behind by their society. Such media have empowered their voices so that they can be heard by those who share their views and who, in the past, have felt isolated and voiceless.

Along similar lines, I've been following current events in France, and Paris in particular, where an apparently leaderless movement of angry disenfranchised (usually) working class or lower middle class workers has sprung up and has nearly succeeded in bringing down Macron's government. What is most fascinating to me about this development is the insistence upon having no one to represent them or speak on their behalf. The distrust of this, what is to them, privileged classes assumption of needing to be represented is across the board to the extent that anyone who has dared to claim to be the voice of this movement or whom the media has sought to present as that voice has been hounded out of the movement precisely because every voice is believed to carry equal status. How long such a stance will last is a moot point. I suspect that the temptation to create/respond to the equivalent of a Trump or a Farage will prove to be too tempting.

Anyway.... In a very odd way, I think that what both Haidt and the French movement might be pointing to might possibly begin to address your question of "why is phenomenology such an unpopular message?"

I am reminded of a quote by Hannah Arendt: *The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist* ( *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951: Part 3, Ch. 13, § 3).

Now, while there is much to treat seriously in the quote, and, in the light of "fake news" and such, how relevant it remains, nonetheless I am struck by the assumption as to how easy it is, according to Arendt, to distinguish fact and fiction or what is true and false. Indeed, in a way, her quote strikes me as something of a ringing endorsement for vertical dualisms. She is right, of course, that totalitarian regimes employ and maintain much of their power by blurring the distinctions between fact and fiction, true and false. But, actually, it's not so much a blurring process as one of falsification - even if the truth being presented is a lie, it is being presented as "the truth" - no question, no doubt, no open possibility that other competing, even contradictory, "truths" may be valid.

As we are seeing all too clearly with Brexit, as with so many other examples, people in general don't much like uncertainty or complexity. They turn, if they can, to straightforward, clear-cut answers - even if the answers have at least elements of falseness in them. The idea, for instance, that one might have very serious criticisms of the EU and still want to remain in it seems to disturb the vast majority of both Leavers and Remainers. It's either good or bad, right or wrong, true or false. And even if the consequences of taking these stances serve to create more problems and end up limiting and restricting rather than opening up and liberating possibilities, they do provide a sense of safety and security and grounding that more complex, open-ended perspectives - such as a phenomenological one - ask us to embrace.

Your own - much appreciated - personal response to the possibility of fluidity expresses the tension all too clearly. To what extent do we want fluidity to eradicate any meaningful identity that we hold on to? Either extreme - total fixedness or complete fluidity - seems undesirable. Much less impossible to achieve. On top of that, either achievement would decrease our ability to survive in the world - or for the world to survive us - for very long.

I agree with you entirely on this. But what appeals to me about existential phenomenology is precisely that it does not make demands on us to shift from one extreme to another. Nor does it elevate one extreme over the other. Instead, it reminds us: there's no way out. That "tension" generated by the demands of each extreme is something we can only seek to navigate through more or less adequately. Phenomenology, for me, is much more about exploring levels of adequacy than it is about some sort of final or complete achievement. Again, it's that both/and rather than either/or. It acknowledges our limitations - such as when you (and I) attempt to examine the extreme reactions we might have towards EU Leavers and Trump followers.

But more than just acknowledge, the willingness to attempt that exploration - even if it fails dismally in challenging and reshaping our views - has an important consequence. We cannot so easily *avoid* the acknowledgment of the limitations we experience and, in doing so, in *owning* those limitations, we are not so quickly and easily swayed by their demands to be treated without deliberation, as personal "truths" that must be defended against the falseness of alternate views. Paradoxically, the ownership of one's limitations seems to at least begin to free us from the excessively vertically dualistic demands of the stance we take.

That seems to me to be a "good enough" challenge to take on board. How might it be expressed/communicated/enacted?

Oddly, what comes to mind is my therapeutic work with couples. Most of that work involves encouraging more accurate listening between partners. Sometimes, this might be done by encouraging each partner to adopt and take on (play-act, in other words) the undesirable view of the other partner and make it his or hers, defend it, argue it. What emerges from this is first of all a clarification of how accurately the view being play-acted reflects the actual views of the other partner. Secondly, it allows the partner who is taking on the alien views to allow them temporary entry into his/her embodied experience. What often happens here is quite amazing: the partner begins to acknowledge the truthfulness in that alien view in that, while still ultimately disagreeing with it, it is not so immediately easy to decry or dismiss. Third, I think that what ultimately happens is that the competing views cease being abstractions - statements that seem to exist on their own - and, instead, what becomes more prominent is the acknowledgement that there is a *person* who is expressing the view and that what is going on is principally at a person-to-person level rather than at a view-to-view level. Obviously, there is much more that goes on in couple therapy, and probably most of that is relevant to our discussion, but if we just stick to this point we can see that there might be something "actionable" that we can offer that follows this same sort of enactment process.

To be fair, I think that this is not too distant from some of the attempts that Rogers made to employ person-centred therapy in politically charged arenas - between Israelis and Palestinians, between white and non-white South Africans, and so forth.

Could something along these lines be a starting point for the exploration of the horizontal possibilities? If, for example, a space was given to explore the deep distrust, possibly even dismissal, between CBT and existential practitioners, what might we begin to discover?

I'm sure that far worthier possibilities exist, but the biggest problem lies in the willingness of competing verticalised "truths" to agree to engage with one another. This is not so easy to achieve. A week or so ago, there were various attempts made on Woman's Hour to get various feminists and trans women to speak with one another regarding the mutual sense of threat each feels from the other group. The attempts proved fruitless and, indeed, the presenter making the attempts, was herself attacked for seeking to create a "damaging and hurtful environment for the trans women". This sort of takes us back to Haidt, doesn't it?

Hi Ernesto

An hour ago, we just heard that contrary to adamant unequivocal statements just this morning, Theresa May is delaying the Brexit vote in parliament. As a nation it feels as if we are definitely exploring uncertainty, 'unchartered territory', and I wonder if an upsurge in support for a People's Vote is an attempt to reach for something solid, a definitive conclusion to an unprecedented time of political instability. From the swamp of the horizontal we desperately search for the vertical.

Yes, I know of Jonathan Haidt. He is active in the Heterodox Academy, of which I am a member. HA is a politically non-aligned project to try to bring ideological diversity and open debate back into the university. University campuses seem to offer the initial battleground for much of these cultural and psychological tensions. I would agree with you that we are experiencing a substantial shift in worldviews mainly affecting millennials and through their insecurity, the rest of us. It seems that there is a developing belief that students have a right not to be challenged. Somehow combined with an edict that privilege is evil, avoidable, and must be an individual source of guilt and shame.

I do agree that social media has become the channel within which these ideologies have spread so quickly. Online, 'social justice warriors' hound any infraction of their 'identity politics'. In response, the accused privileged person must bow down apologetically and display a remorse that serves as 'virtue signalling' (another horrendous term) – 'I know my crime, I accept my guilt, I offer no excuse or response other than complete capitulation'. Any other response, for eg from a 'privileged' white person, that includes an explanation, a request for evidence of guilt, or refutation of the accusation, is termed 'white fragility'. All this is performed in front of a social media mob that immediately gives it the power of public shaming and humiliation. The modern version of the stocks in the public square.

All of this activity reinforces 'vertical dualisms' as you say. I don't know if your thesis is correct that it is the voiceless who are more likely to seek a voice through social media. Perhaps. Having joined social media about 4 years ago, my impression is that some users are quite adept at face-to-face social interaction, not voiceless or disenfranchised at all, but that they can no longer differentiate between virtual reality and physical reality. It's like if they have said it on social media, they have done it. A post is an action, no other action is required, including no follow-through. Thus the term 'slacktivism'. The bigger problem that this points to is that online I end up in a bubble of others who are like me. I do not expose myself to groups or discussions that are opposite to my views. Because social media shows me what it thinks I want to see, I simply do not see those other views come up. As a result, I end up thinking I am viewing the world when I am only viewing 'my world' reflected back to me by Facebook algorithms. So when the majority vote to leave the EU I am shocked. When Donald Trump is elected I am devastated.

What you say about the French 'Yellow Vest' protestors is interesting. It reminds me of Carney Ross's (a former British diplomat) anarchist movement for 'Leaderless Revolutions'. Ross's ideas might serve as some kind of prophylactic to the temptation to give in to a despot like Trump or Farage or worse. He offers a kind of decentralised empowerment rather than authoritarianism or chaos but maybe it lacks the certainty that populists offer. However, those who might submit to a rightwing strong-man won't come across Ross's ideas and those like me who see his ideas only take them into our 'progressive' alliances and not to the 'disenfranchised' demonstrating about fuel prices.

I think your Arendt quote is well placed: *The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e.,*

*the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist* (The Origins of Totalitarianism, 1951: Part 3, Ch. 13, § 3).

For me the notion of ‘truthing’ and ‘facting’ might be closer to what we both seem to be arguing – a process that never claims to have arrived at a destination called ‘truth’ or ‘fact’ but nonetheless is an attempt to value that destination and approximate it in simultaneously diverse ways. Gendlin used to say that there is not just one thing that is the right thing – many things can carry along our experiencing *in a way that experience itself intended* – it is not fully determined. But it is also not arbitrary. We can’t claim one truth but we also can’t claim that everything is relative. If our *facting* is in any way successful (a close enough momentary *match* between worlding and world), experiencing moves itself along and the whole phenomenological inquiry recommences making the hoped-for certainty (or at least aspects of it) once again elusive.

You use Brexit as an example. You say it has shown that ‘people in general don’t much like uncertainty or complexity’. I agree. They would rather have a ‘bad deal’ just to stop having to hear about it let alone think or understand the complexities of the situation. Yanis Varoufakis says about the EU ‘within and against’, demonstrating the kind of horizontal view you rightly point out is so unpopular. It is complex, requiring further and further thinking. Complexity seems to require an openness to uncertainty and an intention not to reach any conclusions. But why can’t we find security in all that openness and even in a valuing of un-knowing? Why does security have to be in the closed and certain, the totalising conclusion stuffing experiencing into a premature grave? Can’t we be secure in ‘the open’?

It seems to me that the question of why phenomenology is so under-valued or eschewed, is the same as the question ‘why do we try not to feel insecure’? or, perhaps slightly more metaphoric, ‘Why are human beings capable of the experience of *home*’? In my own work on this subject of ‘home’ I redefine ‘home’ as interaction, a process that can come and go, mixed with homelessness, strangeness, foreignness, the unfamiliar and unknowing. However, most people tend to define ‘home’ as a *place* of known familiarity, where we can navigate automatically because there are few surprises. The Britain of Brexit.

You say, “Paradoxically, the ownership of one's limitations seems to at least begin to free us from the excessively vertically dualistic demands of the stance we take. That seems to me to be a "good enough" challenge to take on board. How might it be expressed/ communicated/enacted?”

What you describe in your couple’s work is useful. It reminds me of Jordan Peterson and Sam Harris’s method to ‘steel man’ the other’s argument before presenting their own. This is the opposite of creating a straw man. It is in fact, just accurate active listening where the attempt is to understand the other’s experience the way *they* have it by saying it in your own words mostly, showing you have digested and understood it. I agree, this is fundamental. Again, the World Day of Listening was an effort in this direction. I agree entirely with your description of the effects of this kind of listening. Both sides soften their vertical stance as they are accurately heard. Both people begin to see the person behind the view. Both people feel less threatened as it emerges that there is space for both views to exist simultaneously and they exist in a space slightly in front of or beside the people involved. It may be the moment of the rigid vertical beginning to slip into the more inclusive horizontal ...

I agree that this is a possible action. I must confess that my own experience with the WDoL dampens my enthusiasm slightly. In that group I suggested that we might think of moving beyond ‘listening’ to something more like a mutual ‘conversation’ of listening turns (more like couples’ therapy without a therapist). My main urge for this is that it reduces the differential between one who is ‘sorted and skilled enough to listen to you’ and the other who is ‘in need of being listened

to'. When I suggested this, I was quickly shot down, *not listened to*. But why was I shot down? Because I was displaying 'white male privilege' in suggesting that anyone could engage in conversations. I got scapegoated by the head of a listening organisation who was pushing her identity politics! I attempted to hear her concerns and reflect them back but it seemed that the vertical was stronger than the horizontal. I was silenced, as were the many who agreed with me but did not have the courage to join me in the stocks.

Phenomenological listening seems to require a degree of relational support in the face of certainty, support for the phenomenologist to remain open. Yes, all sides need to engage in some kind of desire to understand, and if that desire existed, perhaps there would be less need for this kind of 'phenomenological in-activism' anyway. I opened this contribution noting Teresa May's about-turn. Since then her backbenchers have attempted to oust her as leader. It certainly seems that the political parties come from 'vertical' positions and little or no desire to listen to other perspectives. We have a politics where the phenomenological stance we are suggesting is portrayed as weakness only, indecisiveness, lack of leadership.

The first step that occurs to me is not between existentialism and CBT, though that is an exciting second step I think. For me firstly, the SEA and our own existential institutions would need to open up to such a process. We need to make sure we can walk the walk I think... And proceed in a way that already comes from the horizontal rather than the vertical of knowing better in any way.... Phenomenology is, I think we are saying, a 'way of being', grounded in the humility of experience which supersedes a 'self' that would claim certainty in its futile attempts to establish its own permanence.

Over to you! Greg

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Hi Greg

Re-reading your latest input, I started to think about how what we have been doing might itself encapsulate what we are attempting to address. We sometimes agree and disagree, sometimes partially, sometimes entirely. Sometimes, we even misunderstand each other or (my tendency) don't make our points clear enough so that they open themselves to misunderstanding. And, sometimes, those same misunderstandings open up new possibilities, ways that take us toward further understandings and misunderstandings. All of this, of course, taking place within an open, uncertain dialogue which neither of controls or dominates and whose focus and direction finds its own way rather than is directed in some restrictive fashion by either or both of us - ie. neither of us has set down any rules or regulations as to what can and cannot become part of the dialogue. All very Gadamerian. Also quite liberating in a horizontalish sort of way.

What makes us willing to engage in this sort of dialogue as opposed to other, more typically verticalised ones where "my" view and "your" view compete in a fashion that is designed to extinguish one and elevate the other?

I have no fixed sense of an answer to that question. Instead, here is what my mind came up with:

Hitler's terrifying "success" (if we can call it that) was to convince both himself and a great many others that Jews, homosexuals, Roma people, as well as the mentally and physically disabled were sub-human. Jews in particular, he believed were from another "branch" of evolutionary development to that of other - human - beings. Their intermingling with humans produced the other sub-human "degenerate" categories of beings. This divide between the human and the sub-human provided the moral permission to initiate the attempt to eradicate all traces of the sub-human. This

could only be achieved via the distinction between human and sub-human. Killing humans, for Hitler and those who agreed with his views, would have been immoral. Only by re-categorising the groups into a different grouping - sub-human - could the atrocities become acceptable.

Okay. So far, so obvious. What doesn't get explored sufficiently, I think, is that the response to this kind of categorisation typically repeats or parallels it: those who make such distinctions as human and sub-human are themselves viewed as sub-human by both those who are repelled by the distinction and, as well, by those who have been labelled sub-human. What this then provokes is an argument surrounding which view of sub-humanity is the correct one - rather than an argument that disputes the very idea of sub-humanity (or a distinction between human and sub-human).

This problem persists in all manner of ways and expressions: Myanmar muslims can be hunted down, raped and killed by the military with the backing of a great many Buddhist politicians and citizens because they are not only "different and dangerous" they are both implicitly and at times explicitly viewed as being sub-human because of their different worldview. That's just the first example that popped into my mind. We can add many, many others - not least, the way both Leavers and Remainers are viewed by many on either side. I just had another example spring to mind: Some years ago, in Brixton, waiting for a 45 bus, I noticed a just-married couple emerge from some government building. The people around me, also waiting for the 45 bus, all started cheering and wishing them luck until- they realised that the couple was a same-sex couple who'd just been married. All of a sudden, the cheers turned to jeers, shouts and grumbles about how this shouldn't be allowed to happen, who did they think they were anyway, threats to 'show them what's what' and so forth. The human had suddenly become sub-human. In response, as with my previous examples, the sub-humanised couple and their friends turned onto the jeering bus-stop crowd, in effect accusing them of being - and behaving - in a sub-human way.

The dialogues that we have been exploring in our discussion, the ones that you experienced with WDoL, seem to me to be further examples of that tendency to insist upon a particular kind of distinction between one group and another. It is not a distinction that is about divergent views (though it presents itself in that way). Rather, it is, fundamentally, a distinction between variants in being - who is allowed to be, which expression of being is superior/inferior, which expression of being is to be exterminated - either by exclusion or - more terrifyingly - increasingly via literal acts of extermination. As with Hitler and his cronies, such stances only become morally acceptable via the distinction being made. The distinction re-categorises the opponent into something "less than" - into various versions of "sub-human", in other words.

Phenomenologically speaking, what that distinction ultimately does is to break that relational "lifeworld" (*lebenswelt*) link between one person and another, one group and another, one expression of being and another.

What frightens me more and more as I grow older is how the ramifications of that break in the link continue to expand and extend into ever-increasing facets of our "ordinary" day-to-day existence. As you wrote, in many ways the impact of social media and the way such are employed to communicate have aggravated the breakdown. But my sense is that the source of it originated long before the arrival of current social media. Maybe it's always been there. Thinking about it, all we need to do is look at key socio-cultural texts - the Bible, the Koran, the Vedas for instance - and it's all too easy to find in them not only humans distinguishing between the human and the sub-human, but the god, or gods, as well doing the same (even if both categories were created by him/her/it/them).

Is dividedness appealing? It certainly grounds us. Allows identity to a degree. Secures our views and direction. What else? Are these worth the price we pay?

I want to suggest that the phenomenological project - the attempt to horizontalise - rests on a dialogical enterprise. That method proposed by Husserl (via Brentano) alerts us to the inseparable inter-connectedness between that which is being investigated and the being who investigates, between observer and observed, between self and other, etc such that, ultimately, we begin to realise that the "and" is really a /. As in: I and Thou becomes I/Thou. Being and World becomes being/world (or lifeworld).

(And, by the way, I agree entirely with you - and Gendlin - that *we also can't claim that everything is relative. If our facting is in any way successful (a close enough momentary match between worlding and world), experiencing moves itself along and the whole phenomenological inquiry recommences making the hoped-for certainty (or at least aspects of it) is once again elusive.* It's that very elusivity that makes dialogue so fascinating.)

So, where do we begin? I think that what we are both arriving at - as a temporary resting space, of course - takes us to some forms of dialogue. Dialogues within SEA, between existential and CBT, between and within all manner of topics and issues that might reveal our similarities and differences. Ultimately, we attempt to explore how dialogues both become the means to breaking the relational lifeworld link between us or, alternatively, create that break. This might be worthwhile. If we understood more of the mechanism, perhaps we could find some means to contain the worst excesses from proliferating.

Perhaps, one way is to start with our own limitations, those dialogues where the break seems most desirable, even necessary. And ask ourselves what makes it so? I think that we are quite advanced in exploring such questions from the standpoint of how it impacts upon our experience of being - the sense of denial, rejection, extinction it imposes. What we look at less often, and maybe need to consider far more, is what then, most typically infuses us with the demand to respond with the very same attempt to reject, extinguish, exterminate such that what is created is a mutually explosive engagement within which the one thing that is shared is the insistence upon creating a break in the relational lifeworld link of which we are part.

You ask: why is phenomenology so unpopular? Perhaps because its aim is to remind us of our humanity and of everyone's humanity.

Best

Ernesto

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Dear Ernesto

So we are coming to the end of this dialogue and we are noticing that we have engaged in an instance of what we both argue for. An open meeting where agreement and disagreement, understanding and misunderstanding, interweave in an attempt to follow the directionality of thinking. We did not start with conclusions towards which we have manipulated the dialogue. I would say we have been following a *felt sense* of our interaction and allowed that sensing to guide us onwards, unpredictably, towards a denouement of sorts.

You ask 'what makes us willing to engage in such a dialogue?' and in your epilogue, sent separately to me, you take this further,

'It occurs to me that a personal challenge to the arguments I/we have been making might go like this: I have suggested a distinction between the dialogue you and I have been engaging in and the



more "toxic" ones of the "sub-human" kind. I am wondering, though, what would happen to our dialogue if either you or I said/wrote something that the other felt to be inflammatory/personally insulting or attacking? How would we respond? And how could that response be one that did not immediately diminish/dehumanise the other?

It's not easy for me to imagine you writing something insulting or attacking, towards me at least. But I do suspect that if I wanted to attack back, I would do so by first of all making you into an 'unreal' other. I would, along with Hitler, first of all create an image of you that is vertical, accentuating the negative attributes that make you bad aggressor and me into innocent victim. Let me hold that thought for a moment...

I certainly agree that the very attack from you indicates to me that you have already 'dehumanised' me to some extent, my response then accentuates that process in both of us, and we create the conditions which excuse our response while blaming the other. I suspect we are capable of that though I don't want to test that hypothesis. More importantly, your question 'what *should* our response be?'

In your example of the same-sex newly married couple, I feel a response in myself that is not far from 'those are uneducated dickheads and they are cowards, shouting because they are sure they express the majority view and therefore feel safe to dehumanise and ostracise those who they think are despised generally'. Cowards, ignorant, bigoted and dull. That's a good example of dehumanising meeting dehumanising. And I guess if we are wanting to work phenomenologically, that's where we start, with the volume up to 10.

I think you make an important point that the distinctions between groups are not primarily about diverse views, though it may seem so (Leavers versus Remainers), but rather a division based upon 'variants in being'. Behind my response to someone who voted Leave is my (at first ghostly) image of 'the kind of person' they are. My responses are just as likely to be condemnations of their way of being as arguments against their Brexit position. We need a way to remain connected to the other person in their humanity.

We both are arriving at the idea of 'dialogue'. You narrow this down to an examination of the moment when we respond to rejection with rejection, threat of extermination with the desire to exterminate in return; why this 'insistence upon creating a break in the relational lifeworld link of which we are part'? In my view your important points about breaking the relational links between people and how this re-presents the lifeworld as a divisive combative one, need to be experientialised somehow. People need to be able to find this for themselves, as a discovery that affects them. Could we set up the conditions where each person is encouraged to an everyday 'phenomenologist'? But how?

We have already discussed the importance of listening skills and the possibility of the emergence of the profound 'source of being' that is our common ground, just from a phenomenological kind of listening. I want to take this a step further...

This is the idea that resulted in my being attacked in the World Day of Listening group. I offer it again as a provocation to action: A group from Oxford University have come up with *Conversation Dinners*. Pairs who have never met are seated together and given a Menu of Conversation that 'looks like a restaurant menu, with starters, fish, grills, dessert etc, but instead of descriptions of food dishes, each heading contains topics to talk about, 25 in all'.

Each person gets their chance to choose a topic to discuss and that way the pair works through the menu, usually taking around 2 hours. What happens?

‘You get to know a stranger very well, and find that you are learn a lot about yourself too, in discussing such topics as ambition, curiosity, fear, friendship, the relations of the sexes and of civilisations. One eminent participant said he would never again give a dinner party without this Muse Menu, because he hated superficial chat. Another said **he had in just two hours made a friend** who was closer than many he had known much longer. A third said he had never revealed so much about himself to anybody except his wife. Self-revelation is the foundation on which mutual trust is built’.

Presumably at some point more provocative topics could also be introduced into the menu. I see this as an attempt to knit together the relational fabric within which each person becomes a real person to the other and differing points of view are less likely to cause a condemnation of being. The project (as well as other variations) are described here: [www.oxfordmuse.com](http://www.oxfordmuse.com) .

Examples of events include a mass meal of hundreds of diners in a huge park in a French city. Also, a dinner in Leeds, ‘bringing together local community and business leaders, public service officials, and voluntary association organisers. The Chief Superintendent of Police said afterwards that he learned more about a work colleague during the dinner than he had from working in the same office for twenty years’.

If this is a step in the right direction, should we do it? This is my challenge now, to bring all we have said into action in the world, and action that I believe attempts to avoid more division...

Over to you! Greg

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Dear Greg

I shall try to keep this short and, hopefully, sweet.

I agree with pretty much everything you've stated and, at the same time, am as aware as you are that we are probably still at the "scratching the surface" stage of the dilemmas we are discussing. That still feels like an achievement of sorts and, like you, I think it may be time to expand the dialogue in some way by inviting others to engage and expand upon it in ways that might take issues further forward.

*You wrote: I certainly agree that the very attack from you indicates to me that you have already 'dehumanised' me to some extent, my response then accentuates that process in both of us, and we create the conditions which excuse our response while blaming the other.*

I think that one important aspect here, which I am as likely to fall prey to as well, is the assumption on the person feeling dehumanized that this was the intention set by the assumed 'dehumanizer'. I

think that we fall too rapidly into such conclusions and that, while this would be undoubtedly one possible agenda on the part of the initial dehumanizer, it may also be an outcome of naivety and unintentional abuse. So, I guess that, phenomenologically speaking, one process might be that when experiencing the other's dehumanising statements or behaviours we seek to find the means to suspend judgment as to the statement's/behaviour's intended meaning and seek clarification. This is a HUGE demand, and not one that we may always be able or willing to embrace - but, at least, even if we were to acknowledge that much - that we will not/cannot consider alternative possibilities - we are acknowledging our own role in what might evolve rather than convince ourselves that we are solely victims.

This view, I think, is implicit in your "dialogue dinners" action plan which can in itself be seen as a sort of phenomenological investigation. You highlight those dialogues that provoked connections between participants. But just as important from an investigative standpoint would be those dialogues that failed to achieve that connection. What might be the differences between them? What might be learned that would allow various steps toward the aim of an "everyday phenomenology" being adopted?

I agree that a shift toward something more action-based would be useful. I'm not yet sure if "now" is the time. My sense is that such ideas are too "big" for just you and me to hold or to set into motion. Instead, I think that it might make sense to try to find a way of getting our dialogue "out there" to as many interested people as there may be and, with them, seeing whether an action plan such as what you've suggested could be attempted so that whatever emerges from those attempts could be examined for the purposes of clarifying what might be both the dialogical "walls and bridges" to human encounters.

Best

Ernesto

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Dear Ernesto

Thank you for your short and sweet final instalment. Happy to share this dialogue as the first step, to get it 'out there' and to see if my suggested action, or another, takes shape. I've enjoyed the experience of thinking to and fro, refining, and exploring these ideas, from the political to the fundamental and back again.

Best wishes, Greg

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Hi Greg

Thank you for this dialogue. I greatly valued its openness - in every sense. Not least, its self-determining direction rather than a pre-imposed one. I know that I alluded to this before, but it felt close to something that Gadamer was going on about in that, for me, at least, it was as much "heartfelt" as it was "mindfelt".

Best

Ernesto

**May 25, 2018 - January 21, 2019**

**COMMENTS COLLECTED AT:**

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HuStowCJiCeTqcs37RwGq4CmRt9bQJzH91o\\_Ctj4TLs/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HuStowCJiCeTqcs37RwGq4CmRt9bQJzH91o_Ctj4TLs/edit?usp=sharing)