

YOUNG CHILDREN'S EXISTENTIAL ENCOUNTERS



STUDIES IN THE PSYCHOSOCIAL

ZOI SIMOPOULOU



Studies in the Psychosocial

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Young Children's Existential Encounters

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To Olga and Nikos, and their childhood reveries.

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Part I

Introduction



In Search of a Space

This writing speaks to the times that I stood by a child gazing silently and taken by the poignancy of what they had just said or done whilst also unable to grasp a meaning of it. This moment moves me and immobilises me. I am moved by the child's meaningfulness in a manner that feels almost concrete, physical and enlivening. Awakened to something fresh and new, how do I begin to make sense of it? How do I stay true to its newness? How do I stay true to it, capture it without deadening it?

In my work with primary school children I watch them playing out their experiences, their agonies and their pleasures yet sometimes more than others their play struck me as significant. What are these moments made of? They arrive with a captivating meaningfulness: closely located in children's lives yet existentially nuanced. They play in a manner that feels reflective, almost poetic; a turning inwards to take some of the world in and to make sense of it. Perhaps it is this contemplative quality—capacity—of the children that gives these moments some of their distinctive nuancing: they arrive busily embedded in their everydayness and give in to an attentive silence. A pause that asks me to speak to it. How do I speak to it? How am I present in this moment?

The question of meaning intensified in the course of my training in psychoanalytic observation informed by the theoretical tradition of British Objects relations. Psychoanalytic infant observation was first established in 1948 by Esther Bick as part of the Tavistock child psychotherapy training, as a method of directly observing infants and children in their natural environments in order to understand the nature of their mental processes (Bick 1964; Shuttleworth 1997; Urwin and Sternberg 2012). Drawing on Klein's (1997) discussion of the analytic playroom as a 'total situation' encompassing of both the child's past and present, in my observations I reflect upon the surrounding subjects as external representations of internal unconscious objects and think of her play largely as a symbolic manifestation of her unconscious workings: her surroundings (peers, carers, observer, objects) as representations of her internal objects and her interactions with them as play-outs of her earliest phantasies (Shuttleworth 1997; Price and Cooper 2012). Unconscious feelings and states of mind are powerfully present similar to the therapeutic room where the child's play is thought to enact the relations of her internal objects in the light of her phantasies, wishes and fears (Rustin 2012, pp. 14–15). Psychoanalytic observation becomes for me an emotional space that looks at the unconscious dynamics in a meaningful relational matrix by means of transference and countertransference. In this context I think of the child's play as driven by her unconscious workings—or my imaginings of her unconscious workings.

I feel that I have just found a language with which I can meet her inner worlds embedded in her play—what drives her, what she agonises over, what she wishes—and I begin to wonder about her play as a communication of some kind of expansion, a relationship with the world as she takes more of the world in. Becoming part of something larger, the sizes, scopes, angles of her world are changing. I watch her in her play grappling with herself and I look for words to attend to an emerging existentially laden nuancing in her play. How can I think of her play in the light of her growing awareness of her being in the world, being part of something larger and constantly awakening to it as she finds herself in it by means of her everyday encounters, her experiences and her life as it comes to pass? In what language can I speak of this, how do I name and respond to it?

The main criticism of psychoanalytic observation as a research method comes from within psychoanalysis. The method is challenged as lacking the means for meaning to be confirmed: in psychoanalysis, interpretation is worked through by means of the client's response, something that is not applicable in psychoanalytic observation (Urwin and Sternberg 2012, p. 5). Sensitised and attuned to the child's very own language, that is, her play, psychoanalytic observation considers meaning by the very entering into the imaginative world of the child as it unfolds in a dynamic relationship informed by transference and countertransference. Staying longer with this relationship, I look into it for the space to think about the observer as an other who errs, misses or wishes and the child as a knower of her experience; that is, to ponder over the blurred boundary between the child and the observer that is present in the act of interpretation and in the subjective and relational nature of meaning making in psychoanalytic observation. When is the blurred boundary between the self and the other meaningful and when does it become unproductive if not potentially dangerous?

This present work comes from my decision to spend more time with children in order to think more about these questions. That is, to explore the existential in their everyday lives and to think how their play is expressive of both, their inner states and their encounters with the world and its existential givens. I understand that the edges of the inner and outer world are not clearly demarcated and that the outer is always seen through the inner whilst the inner is projected in the outer: I cannot but become aware of transience as an existential given through my encounter with another that comes and passes, revealing a sense of self located in a larger outsidersness. My purpose is not to make their boundaries clear—how can I separate the inner from the outer? It is not the experience in itself that is psychoanalytic or existential but my thinking and my language that make it so; the meaning that my words ascribe to it or else the side that they light each time. Playing with different words, I make a meaning—then another; I look at one side pretending for a while that the other is not there. Coming from a specific psychoanalytic place, my purpose is to make a space to accommodate such play, this dialogue between a psychoanalytically informed and an existentially grounded thinking of children's play. By moving between different spaces, I also look to problematise the

notion of myself as an expert and to be present with each child as another who is subject to losses, drives and wishes as well as existential givens. This study explores how the existential is present in children's lives as well as the possibility of an integrative understanding of children's existential encounters by means of psychoanalytic observation.

My focus is with preschool children's relationship with the existential as this is played out in their everydayness. Past work on the existential in children has relied on language as the predominant source of knowing. With the present piece, I look at preschool children's everyday existential encounters drawing on their play, their encounters as well as the relational dynamics in the course of the observations. My interest lies more with the subjective meanings and the affective qualities of children's relationship with the existential: how is this relationship present in the child's play and her ordinary doing? Does it come alive in a word, an object, an image, a movement, an encounter? How does it reveal itself in the child's relationships with others including myself as someone who arrived in search of it? I use psychoanalytic observation as a methodology that focuses on the child's interior worlds as they unfold in her play and in the relationship with the observer, but by bringing it into this study I inquire into the space that some of the psychoanalytic thinking has for preschool children's existential encounters and explore the possibility of an integrative approach towards them, by moving between existential-phenomenological and psychoanalytic ideas. This work explores thus the possibility of an integrative understanding of children's existential encounters by embodying it.

Taking a relational psychoanalytic turn has allowed the space to explore the existential as fluidly located between the child and myself and our interior and exterior worlds. In the course of our time together, we met each other encountering the existential, playing out these encounters in imaginative ways and symbolic languages. The existential did not emerge as a question per se but was embodied in children's play and in their stories—in the way they were present and in the relationship that we formed together. It emerged elusive as a quality, a shade or a nuance embedded in a movement, a voice or a gaze. Along with the body, time and space emerged implicated in children's relationship with the existential.

The succeeding chapter of Part I comprises a review of literature on the topic of the existential in children. It starts with an inquiry into its definition before it looks at education and psychotherapy as those relational practices that share an interest in children's subjective histories and the meanings they make of these. A lack of attention to preschool children's existential encounters is identified alongside the need of adults' (practitioners and researchers alike) readiness to engage with their own existential encounters so as to make space for those of children. The chapter concludes with a review of the dialogue between existentialism and psychoanalysis, drawing links between the creative and the interpersonal unconscious. The space for an existential/phenomenological-psychoanalytic integrative approach is identified for the purpose of understanding children's lives from a psychosocial perspective.

In the third chapter I set out the onto-epistemological underpinnings of the present study and make a case for a relational turn that—drawing on relational psychoanalysis—acknowledges the reciprocal nature of the research relationship. I draw specifically on relational psychoanalytic theories of dreaming that challenge the self-other boundaries and make space for the existential to be explored as it is communicated in a person-to-person, unconscious-to-unconscious relationship. I also draw on feminist and post-structural ideas of meaning as fluid, liminal and ongoing to facilitate a movement between psychoanalytic and existential/phenomenological ideas to think and write the existential with. Finally, the method of psychoanalytic observation is presented alongside the rationale over its appropriateness for the current inquiry.

The second part of the book is a kaleidoscopic writing inquiry into children's existential encounters as these emerged in the course of a six-month psychoanalytic observation at their nursery. Part II comprises five chapters, five pieces with each piece dreaming of an existential theme as encountered in our relationship together with each child, in the company of one or more thinkers. The writing takes the form of a kaleidoscopic inquiry into the observations as different theories, selves, time-spaces, memories and associations blend together to produce moving—working—images of meaning.

Nothingness: May and Gaston Bachelard. Nothingness does not emerge as an abstract concern but more raw, rooted in May's experience of the world by means of her body as she travels to faraway places in search of gold. In turn, an attention to her bodily experience gives life to nothingness as a moment of realisation in childhood. Moustakas (1966, p. 10) speaks of the existential moment as a moment that is not defined by time, gender or age. Rather, it is a moment of feeling, of a reflexive solitude that is attuned to a sense of emptiness or futility of your existing; in this moment you 'hear your own inner dialogue, feel your footsteps and know them to be your own'. Bachelard (1971) too talks about this moment when the child suddenly becomes aware of the self, astonished by being. Does this include the nothingness in being? May's experience of the world and world's nothingness in our encounters is characterised by a strong physicality. She searches by means of her senses and her body and finds nothing. In her play—her way of being?—she is in a lively—life?—search for nothing. Her search stays with me as attuned to the search for meaning in the face of meaninglessness as inherently constituted in life (Frankl 1967).

Strangeness and absurdity: Nadia and Albert Camus. Camus (2013) meets the absurd in the day-to-day activity turning the familiar strange. Nadia and myself meet and find each other in the observations as if thrown into them, in the same way that we are thrown into life and wonder about it as something that matters in a personal manner (Heidegger 1962). We become aware, through each other, of the act of observation as a strange act, a kind of doing that relies on and exposes a not doing. Nadia mirrors herself in my observing and allows me into some of her experience of being an observer in her nursery, a stranger to it. She allows me to observe her observing, observe her wandering and turns my attention to the space of her wandering. It is by means of her very wandering that Nadia comments on the absurdity of the nursery—the world—as a space of doing or constantly becoming and by means of her 'strange' presence that she questions the space of the nursery as a place of belonging, the world as a place in which one feels at home.

Ontological insecurity: Edward and Ronald Laing. In my pairing with Laing (1965) and his demystification of ontological insecurity as present in everyday living, I look to attend to Edward's evocative play as expressive

of his ontological sensitivity, that is, to his profound attunement to presence and absence in their interplay as both interior and exterior states of being. His capacity to play them out in symbolic ways, yet to concretise them—by the movement of his hand, the volume of his voice, in hiding and seeking his own body—turns some of his play into a raw representation of a very abstract yet fundamental and thus discomfiting state of being where one is in touch with being in itself as an uncertainty. Edward and myself, we use each other as a boundary against which we can engage in a questioning of the interiority and exteriority of existence. With his play Edward asks: am I here if I am loud, if I am fast—faster?, if I hide, if I am buried, eaten up, if I am broken off, if you do not see me?

Death: loss and growth: Baba. Baba names death and wonders about it alongside 'forever' bringing to it a concern about continuation or permanence. She asks: 'numbers go on forever after you die, don't they?' And then, 'who wants to die forever?' In her play, she also personifies death: it is found in the reminiscent smell of an empty perfume bottle; in the texture of a wooden table; the size of a baby hammer; the colour of the bluebells; the sequence of numbers. Unlike with other children, I do not engage only one other existential thinker to think death with. My thinking is instead informed by Klein's early object relations theory that encompasses death in the form of annihilation in the face of separation and loss. Heidegger (1962, p. 282) too speaks of loss as our closest experience of death as living beings:

Death does indeed reveal itself as a loss, but a loss such as is experienced by those who remain. In suffering this loss, however, we have no way of access to the loss-of-Being as such which the dying man 'suffers'. The dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just 'there alongside'.

Baba asks about death, loss and separation by means of her play; she plays out her asking through words and symbolic objects and by triggering in me memories of loss, separation and death. She expresses a relationship with death (Yalom 1980) as she senses, imagines and responds to it.

Selfhood: Eilidh and Fernando Pessoa. Eilidh dialogues with Pessoa about the question of the self as plural and relational. Eilidh questions the

self as a singular entity through her generative play, her tireless masking, the way in which she goes in and out of costumes, roles and identities. Pessoa does so through his heteronyms, by moving in and out of characters, persons that he makes who have different names, features and lives and exist alongside each other. Why is it not enough for Eilidh to rest in herself? Why does she refuse just to be herself and decides instead to try out different clothes, costumes, characters, roles occupying other spaces, selves and times? Heidegger (1962, p. 220) speaks of curiosity as one manifestation of our fallen-ness into the world:

Dasein has, in the first instance, fallen away from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being its Self, and has fallen into the world.

Far from home, the world is then a place to which we long to belong as we engage in a ceaseless search for the self by means of our very being in it. Or is our very being-in-the-world a ceaseless search for the self? Psychoanalysis helps to think about this question relationally with its attention to the mother-infant relationship as that first self-other relationship that allows a sense of self by means of another. Winnicott (1965) adds to that the thought of a sense of self emerging not only by being mirrored but also by not being found or else by being failed by the other, a kind of failure that allows the self to emerge from the confrontation with one's own edges and boundaries. Taking this back to my time with Eilidh, what in her drew me readily in—how close to her yet far from finding her I felt by the end of our time together, I think of how the reciprocal use of each other (I looked to find Eilidh who kept on changing)—is also an escape from each other, from being found, confirming also of the fluidity in being and in meaning as they escape being captured.

The final part of the book looks at how a methodological encompassing of liminality allows in turn the space for a more encompassing exploration of children's existential encounters by means of a movement between different meanings and traditions, persons and their interior and exterior worlds. I draw specifically on Bollas' (2007) notion of the interpersonal unconscious to discuss how children's existential encounters are communicated by means of unconscious articulations through reverie. Attending to interpersonal unconscious communication has allowed to begin

to imagine the existential in reciprocity, embodied in metaphors of characters, images, sounds and scents.

Cloke et al. (1991, p. 77) say that with their work they aim:

to retrieve these experiences from the academic netherworld and to return them to everyone by reawakening a sense of wonder about the earth and its places.

Their work is in the field of human geography but their approach to research speaks to me and to my hopes for this work. Cloke et al. (1991) speak of knowing as a personal process of wondering; an intimate encounter with the world we are already in and which we forget or forget to notice. There is something about their view that is especially meaningful for existential encounters, that is, encounters with givens of our existence from which we cannot escape or be without. With this work, I look to explore the existential encounters in early childhood in preschool years. Just as my encounters with the children awoke me to my childhood through the senses and by means of memories and images, the present work looks to awaken its readers to a reverie of their own childhoods and their personal encounters with the existential. For that, even though it grows out of an adult academic womb, it looks to be a child-to-child, reverie-to-reverie encounter about the existential. Or else, a reverie of the existential from the place of an adult who has been a child.

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Children's Existential Encounters in Literature

Existentialism

An Attempt at Definition

Drawing on its Latin origin, to ex-sist or exist is:

to emerge or to stand out from the background as something really there. Putting it more philosophically, to exist is to stand out from nothing. (Macquarrie 1973, p. 62)

Aside from the active feel, there is also a contextual quality in the above definition: space and time are *built in* to existence. To exist is to have a place and time in the world and to emerge from it ceaselessly. We occupy it constantly and, as we do, we also constantly stand out from it. This dynamic mobility is characteristic of human beings (among other beings) who not only 'are' but also think about their being and their becoming. Would it be possible to talk of *going out* instead of *standing out*, that is, of an ongoing movement towards or beyond where one is at any given time,

what Macquarrie (1973, p. 69) calls ‘always on the way to somewhere else’? As with existing, are we then all always engaged in existentialism?

Among the diverse approaches to existentialism as a philosophy, a school or an approach, Macquarrie chooses to think of it as a style. He identifies the absence of a common body of doctrine among all existential philosophers yet acknowledges a resemblance in its practice, that is, ‘a shared style of philosophising that permits us to call them existentialists’ (Macquarrie 1973, p. 14). Sartre speaks of the word as ‘now so loosely applied to so many things that it no longer means anything at all’ (Sartre 1988, p. 347). For Macquarrie, this is due to the elusiveness that is inherent in existentialism as consistent with the lived experience:

The advocates of this philosophy deny that reality can be neatly packaged in concepts or presented as an interlocking system ... In the existentialist view there are always loose ends. Our experience and our knowledge are always incomplete and fragmentary. (Macquarrie 1973, p. 13)

Phenomenology and Narration

In his overview of a body of work on existentialism Macquarrie refrains from presenting a summative definition of existentialism. Instead, and throughout his writing, he moves between different articulations in a descriptive manner, which reads as attuned to the existential nuancing. His writing is seen as both consistent (Ogletree 1973) and inconsistent (Shofner 1975) with his intention to present a phenomenological account of existentialism; yet the emergence of diverse responses to his writing can be thought as indicative of a writing that is alive to the fragmentary and incoherent nature of the topic it grapples with. Macquarrie confronts the interwoven threads of phenomenology and existentialism, acknowledging the phenomenological manner as inbuilt in most existentialists whilst also tracing the existential back to the first acts of narration. In other words, he discusses the existential as peopled and grounded to the everydayness of being and tightly tied to meaning speaking to existential encounters as these are inquired into in the present writing.

The close relationship between phenomenology and existentialism is discussed by thinkers who acknowledge the truth of the subjective experience. Each identifies a different aspect of it: Merleau-Ponty (2005) points to the sensory perception of reality, whereas Heidegger (1988) points to time and space as inherently implicated in our subjective experience. In literary work, Camus suggests that our living is tied to an ongoing search for personal meaning (Camus 1955, 2013; Fiut 2009) whereas May introduces an integrative scientific and ontological understanding of the person's experience bringing phenomenology into his psychotherapeutic practice (May 2007; Reeves 1977). This latter self-reflexive focus turns phenomenology into a method of observation aimed at enhancing awareness of our existential givens and a more authentic existence in the acknowledgement of our limitations and our possibilities within them (Spiegelberg 1960). In his review of Macquarrie's work, Ogletree (1973, p. 305) suggests that

the existential style of philosophizing appears to be phenomenological description directed to the features of experience highlighted by characteristic existential questions: questions about finitude, death, anxiety, responsibility, and understanding as these emerge in the consciousness of concrete subjects.

For Heidegger (1962) phenomenology is a philosophy that is concerned with the subjective truth, the possibilities of which are bound together with the temporality of human existence in time and space. He opened up this personal philosophy to contain the less conscious parts of the subjective truth; in doing so he acknowledged the potential role of the unconscious in the lived experience.

Existentialism is centred on the person's desire for meaning which becomes more prominent in times of change and turbulence challenging our perception of our place in the world, from the cosmological revelation of infinite spaces to the imposition of physical restrictions:

The existentialist style of thought seems to emerge whenever man finds his securities threatened, when he becomes aware of the ambiguities of the world and knows the pilgrim status in it. (Macquarrie 1973, p. 60)

Drawing on his time in a concentration camp, Frankl (1967) understood the person's search for meaning as both a motivation and a means of survival leading to the development of logotherapy as an existential approach to therapeutic work. Macquarrie (1973) discusses narrative traces in existentialism as closely linked to the very act of meaning. A hermeneutic thread takes existentialism back to the emergence of myths and follows through to today each time the person seeks to make sense of herself in the face of limitations using narration—including symbolic narrative forms such as art—in everyday contexts, creative or therapeutic spaces. The very act of storying is a personal, active search for the self and embodies an existential curiosity:

Psychological accounts have drawn attention to the parallels between myths and dreams, and have seen in them projections or objectifications of man's inner desires and strivings. Existentialist accounts see in mythology man's first gropings towards an identity: to tell a story of human origins, for example, is to confess a self-understanding. (Macquarrie 1973, p. 35)

Macquarrie (1973, p. 37) finds in myths the human struggle with the inherent paradoxes of existence. Freedom, finitude, guilt and the quest of meaning find their symbolic expression in myths and (later on) in stories, novels, poems and plays, before they emerge from their latent mythological form to become the explicit object of critical interest and study of ancient philosophers and more recently existentialists and existential psychotherapists.

Existentialism invites the personal meaning of the individual, child and adult alike, in her everyday experience of being in the world. As such it welcomes the existential as it lives out in descriptive personal articulations, including embodied and symbolic forms. We exist in the world as beings with bodies, bodies in ceaseless personal relation with the world, everywhere and all the time. With its links to phenomenology, existentialism attends to the ordinary experience of being in its everydayness, thus allowing the construction of a background that could accommodate children's existential encounters. At the same time its narrative underpinnings make space for the existential to be thought in the light of meaning that is subjective and relational. Subjectivity lies at the centre of both

phenomenology and narration, closely linked to body, relatedness and everydayness as inherent and defining characteristics.

Characteristics

To emphasise the dynamic generative nature of existentialism that is inexhaustible as deeply attuned to the human experience, Macquarrie (1973) turns his attention to the person as its agent, as she who affords existentialism its distinctive characteristics. Existentialism begins with the person that exists first, rather than thinks first, and knows by means of her very own existence. Existentialism asserts that the person thinks passionately, that is, by means of her very engagement with the actualities of existence (Macquarrie 1973, p. 15).

Unamuno (2005, chap. 2) says:

Philosophy is a product of the humanity of each philosopher, and each philosopher is a man of flesh and bone who addresses himself to other men of flesh and bone like himself. And, let him do what he will, he philosophizes not with the reason only, but with the will, with the feelings, with the flesh and with the bones, with the whole soul and the whole body. It is the man that philosophizes.

Some existentialists have met their method in phenomenology: with attention to description and by looking inwards, the phenomenologist seeks to offer a description of that which appears or else of what is seen. Context, presupposition and interpretation are not separate from what is seen but part of it because it is made and remade continuously. Existentialists craft phenomenology to match their purposes and their interest in the existence rather than in the essence (Macquarrie 1973; Spiegelberg 1960). Meaning becomes the ongoing and fragmentary experience of persons as they participate in the world in the fullness of their being. One side of this is relativism: ongoing movement can give rise to ongoing questioning, a doubt that, although an inherent position in the existential thinking, if taken to its limits can be feared as nihilism; an other reading brings attention to the body as the ceaselessly generative