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## **EXISTENTIAL UNCERTAINTY**

Certainty. It's the most gorgeous lie of them all. Dennis Lehane

The second foundational Principle of existential phenomenology, *uncertainty*, arises as an immediate consequence of relatedness. Uncertainty expresses the inevitable and inescapable openness of possibility in any and all of our reflections upon our existence.

As was concluded with regard to the Principle of relatedness, our reflections upon existence, be it in general or having to do with "my own" existence, can no longer be held *solely* by me or exist in some way exclusively "within" me. Instead, relatedness exposes the many uncertainties that impinge upon every attempt at reflection. The Principle of uncertainty asserts that I can never fully determine with complete and final certainty or control not only *what* will present itself as stimulus to my experience, but also *how* I will experience and respond to stimuli. An immediate consequence of this stance is that even how I will experience my self under differing stimulus conditions cannot be predetermined.

Does this imply that existential phenomenology recognises no certainties whatsoever? Not at all. There exist any number of preconditions - including environmental and bio-chemical variables - that are required for the establishment and maintenance of life. Without them, no life is possible nor can be sustained. These are the certainties upon which life is able to come into, and continue, being. This second Principle concerns itself with those uncertainties that arise *within* the context of these preconditions. It argues that the person's lived experience within the certain pre-conditions of existence is constantly open to multiple possibilities – and hence remains uncertain. As Simone de Beauvoir reminds us, '[f]rom the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity' (de Beauvoir, 1986: 9). The Principle of uncertainty exemplifies this conclusion. At any moment, for example, all prior knowledge, values, assumptions and beliefs regarding self, others and the world in general may be opened to challenge, reconsideration or dissolution in multiple ways that might surprise or disturb. Common statements such as 'I never thought I would act like that', or 'She seemed to turn into someone I didn't know', or 'World events have convinced me that I just can't make sense of things any longer' point us to positions that at least temporarily acknowledge the uncertainties of being. Social psychological studies on obedience to authority and social conformity provide powerful evidence of how easily we can think, feel and act in ways that we would never have predicted (Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 1969).

As a "way in" to the further clarification of the Principle of uncertainty, let me first consider it from the

standpoints of contemporary physics and from Isaiah Berlin's argument for value pluralism. Although approaching the question from a different perspective to that of existential phenomenology, I hope to demonstrate that their conclusions regarding uncertainty are not only compatible, they also serve to make the Principle more accessible.

### ***Uncertainty In Contemporary Physics***

We are all agreed that your theory is insane. The question that divides us is whether it is insane enough to have a chance of being correct. Neils Bohr to Wolfgang Pauli

I have long been fascinated by the temporal resonance between the development of existential phenomenology and the revolutionary changes taking place in Western physics. I have often wondered whether one body of thought impacted on the other in any way. Although I know of no historical research that has been carried out along such lines, I find it difficult to imagine that philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, who came from a background in mathematics, would have remained unaware of the radical theories being propounded by his scientific colleagues.

At the beginning of the 20th century, theories of physics with regard to light assumed that light was best understood if viewed as a wave. Albert Einstein's equations argued instead that light was a stream or "packet" of energy particles which he named quanta. Unlike waves, quanta have mass. This view was initially seen as being fantastical because light could not possibly have weight. Nonetheless, Einstein's hypothesis could not be disproven. However, although Einstein was correct in arguing that light was made up of quanta, older experiments which showed that light was also wave-like also continued to be verified. Depending upon the investigator's focus of observation, light could be simultaneously both a packet of energy (quanta) or a wave. Uncertainty in physics was established (Al-Khalili, 2009, 2012).

With the publication of Einstein's *Theory of Special Relativity* in 1905 (Einstein, 2001), the certainties of a mechanical and predictable universe began to be dismantled. Relativity theories argued that the one fixed constant - the speed of light - did not ever alter regardless of the conditions under which it was placed. However, the same could not be said of space and time. These now could be seen to be *relative*. For example, distance could no longer be understood as a relation between two points. Distance also involved the observer whose relation to these two points directly affected the outcome of their measurement. Equally, intervals of time were seen to have no absolute value since the flow of time was demonstrated to be dependent on the relation between object and observer (Einstein et al, 2000).

Now, two competing and contradictory truths could co-exist. Uncertainty was introduced as a basic given of our relationship to the universe. The relativity of time and space was extended to become a relativity of knowledge. Whereas 19th Century physics had assumed that the more we understand, the more we can know

with absolute certainty, 20th Century physics began to reveal that the more we understand, what we can know becomes less predictably certain (Al-Khalili, 2009).

Contemporary dynamical systems theories of physics, such as Chaos Theory, are often misunderstood as arguing that the behaviour of complex systems is unpredictable. Instead, as was summarised by the theoretical physicist, Jim Al-Khalili, what is actually being proposed is that: 'All the complexity of the universe emerges from mindless simple rules repeated over and over again. But as powerful as this process is, it is also inherently unpredictable' (Al-Khalili, 2009). In other words, at the heart of all our certainties lies uncertainty. Whereas classical physics had assumed that unpredictable events were caused by some *external* interference upon a system that was otherwise coherent and predictable, dynamical systems theories have shown that this unpredictability is built into the system itself. And more, that it is this very same systemic unpredictability that generates what we experience as pattern and structure. Contemporary theories of physics view Order and Chaos, waves and matter, structure and process as inter-weaving paradoxical polarities (Al-Khalili, 2012).

Not being able to be certain should not, paradoxically, lead us to assume the certainty of uncertainty. From an either/or stance, I can claim that something is either certain or uncertain. If I declare it certain, then I am adopting a position of certainty. Equally, however, my opposite declaration of uncertainty is also rooted in certainty in that I am now arguing that I am certain that something is uncertain. Both these claims can be seen to rely upon a foundational stance of certainty. In effect they are saying: ultimately all statements about either certainty or uncertainty are statements of certainty.

The existential phenomenological Principle of uncertainty, like dynamical systems theories in physics, proposes an alternative stance - that of *the uncertainty of uncertainty*. This stance treats both our claimed certainties as well as our claimed uncertainties as uncertain. In doing so, it seeks to emphasise the inseparable inter-weaving between certainty and uncertainty. Because of this inter-connectedness, no certainty (including the certainty of uncertainty) can ever be wholly certain; there can only be uncertain certainties and uncertain uncertainties.

### ***Uncertainty: Isaiah Berlin's Value Pluralism***

The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty; not knowing what comes next. Ursula K. Le Guin

Although it would be seriously misleading to suggest that he was an existential phenomenological philosopher, and he would almost certainly have been displeased to be so labelled, it is my view that, in his theory of *value pluralism*, Isaiah Berlin provides the most insightful analysis of several key implications arising from the Principle of uncertainty. Berlin's central argument criticised the general Western assumption that any theories or conclusion concerned with human values such as liberty, kindness, and equality could

only deemed to be true or correct if they revealed a coherence and consistency between all the various human values. If any conflicts or contradictions between values were identified, then the theory had to be wrong in some way. In his review of Berlin's posthumous book, *Political Ideas In The Romantic Age: Their Rise And Influence On Modern Thought* (Berlin, 2006), John Gray summarises this persistent assumption that

*all genuine human values must be combinable in a harmonious whole. Conflicts of values are to be seen as symptoms of error that in principle can always be resolved: if human values seem to come into conflict that is only because our understanding of them is imperfect, or some of the contending values are spurious; and where such conflicts appear there is a single right answer that – if only they can find it – all reasonable people are bound to accept.* (Gray, 2006: 20)

Berlin emphatically rejected all of these claims. Instead, his counter-argument to this view, which he rightly saw as having dominated Western intellectual tradition, asserted that, on the contrary, ‘conflicts of values are real and inescapable, with some of them having no satisfactory solution.... [C]onflicts of value go with being human’ (Gray, 2006: 20). From a political standpoint, Berlin contended, this Enlightenment idea of an ideal and monistic harmony and perfection in human values generated the cataclysms of tyranny which had overshadowed his lifetime. For, at the heart of this idea lay ‘the intellectual roots of some of the major political disasters of the twentieth century’ (ibid.: 20). When considering the excesses of political intolerance and curtailment of freedom of expression associated with both extreme right-wing and left-wing 20th Century regimes, for example, Berlin’s view was that these were not explicable as errors in the application of a particular ideology, but, rather, were ‘the result of a resolute attempt to realize an Enlightenment utopia – a condition of society in which no serious conflict any longer exists’ (ibid.: 21).

The point being made by Berlin addresses the key concerns and assumptions to be found in the second Principle of existential phenomenology. Together, they ask us to embrace existence’s lack of completeness, and the inevitable failure of any attempt to complete it by realising all our possibilities (Cohn, 2002). Some critically-minded therapists have arrived at very similar conclusions: In their text, *Pluralistic Counselling And Psychotherapy*, Mick Cooper and John McLeod argue that both an existential therapy steeped in certainty as well as an existential therapy that is certain about its uncertainty is a contradiction in terms; existential uncertainty always holds open plural possibilities (Cooper & McLeod, 2011). In summarising Berlin's value pluralism, John Cherniss provides a particularly revealing and relevant passage. He writes: ‘Man is incapable of self-completion, and therefore never wholly predictable; fallible, a complex combination of opposites, some reconcilable, others incapable of being resolved or harmonised; unable to cease from his search for truth, happiness, novelty, freedom, but with no guarantee . . . of being able to attain them’ (Cherniss, 2006, quoted in Gray, 2006: 21). This quote, it seems to me, provides us with a powerful summary of the Principle of existential uncertainty.

## **Existential Uncertainty: Implications**

It is not certain that everything is uncertain. Blaise Pascal

All of us are likely to have had the experience of changing our view with regard to someone or some event. A close friend acts in a way that betrays my trust and brings the friendship to an end. I discover a new-found ability that alters the direction of my professional life. I watch a film that I initially thought to be a work of genius but which now seems superficial and pedestrian. If such obvious possibilities of uncertainty were all that this second Principle sought to highlight, then it would hardly be deserving of overmuch attention. Surprising and unexpected events come upon us all at some time or other during our lives. However, rather than just being an occasional and temporary consequence of unusual circumstances, existential phenomenology proposes that uncertainty remains a constant of existence. Shattering in its implications, this Principle remains initially counter-intuitive. Uncertainty expresses its presence not only in the surprising events in our lives, but just as equally and forcefully in the expected and (seemingly) fixed meanings and circumstances of everyday life. The existential phenomenological Principle of uncertainty urges us to treat each instance of "the expected" as novel, full of previously unforeseen qualities and possibilities.

This "both/and" way of considering the implications of the Principle of uncertainty is not always sufficiently addressed by existential therapists. Yet it offers potentially valuable insights. For example, this view of uncertainty suggests that a couple's experience of sexual boredom within their relationship is not directly due to the rigidity of habitual behaviour, but rather to the degree to which they have detached themselves from experiencing the uncertainty that exists within the rigid conditions being maintained. Television "lifestyle" experts or newspaper agony aunts, for instance, forever suggest novel positions or activities as ways of "spicing up" a couple's moribund sexual life. In taking this stance, they fail to consider how it is that any number of other couples may be happily satisfied with, and require no "spicing up" of, their sexual relations, even though what they do and how and when they do it might be characterised as being habitual and predictable. Equally, such pundits avoid alerting their audience to the likelihood that even the suggested novel position or activity may all too rapidly come to be experienced as tedious and bland. What such examples make plain is that the experience of pleasurable excitement in one's sexual relations, or the lack of it, has little to do with matters of novelty or habit, but rather reveals the consequences of an openness toward, or an avoidance of, the uncertainty that exists at all times and is expressed in all actions. In sum, uncertainty reminds us that every reflectively structured pattern of certainty nonetheless is grounded in uncertainty.

In general, Western culture perhaps overvalues the comfort of certainty and underestimates the benefits of uncertainty. We assume a "naturalness" to the former and impose a sense of the unusual or the unwanted in the latter. We tell ourselves that it is better to act as though we were certain of ourselves or some viewpoint rather than reveal ourselves to be uncertain. Certainty is strength; uncertainty weakens us. In contrast to this, consider the following existential alternatives:

Most days, when either I or my wife leave our home on our own, we embrace one another at the doorway and say something like: 'See you, later.' Our statements are full of certainty. There will certainly be a "later" during which we will see one another. However, were we to acknowledge the impact of existential uncertainty, what we would have to say to one another, at best, would be: 'Hopefully, we'll see one another again.' At first, this latter statement strikes us as being decidedly odd, perhaps even ghoulish. But consider it this way: If we truly accepted its implications, and placed uncertainty upon our desire and hope to meet again, then might it not be likely that our embrace, our potentially temporary but also potentially permanent "goodbye" to one another would be imbued with a value, a quality, a fervour that would be far less likely to exist in that "goodbye" which assumes there will be many other future "goodbyes and hello's" to come? The "goodbye" that assumes a future "hello" permits me to put off until another time that which I might want to express or will punish my self for not expressing if, unexpectedly, no further opportunities become possible.

A client of mine, Sharon, came to see me because she was so upset by her mother's worsening of dementia and the effect it was having upon their relationship. Sharon's mother had been in a Home for some eight months and Sharon had arranged her life in such a way that she could visit her three times a week. However, as the impact of her dementia increased, Sharon was finding it more and more difficult to force herself to visit her mother. She explained to me that their encounters had become increasingly painful because her mother now rarely recognised Sharon and when told by her that they were mother and daughter, rejected such statements as nonsense. Sharon's insistence as to their relationship only succeeded in generating ever increasing levels of disturbance for her mother such that she became verbally abusive towards Sharon and demanded that she leave. Sharon felt deeply guilty about her increasing lack of desire to visit her mother as well as her growing anger towards her. During therapy, we addressed these feelings and, as well, Sharon's expectations and feelings of loss. Though still alive, her mother had begun to feel relationally dead to Sharon and several times, breaking down in fits of anger and shame, she expressed the wish that her mother would now die physically as well as relationally. The breakthrough came for Sharon when, on one of her visits, having given up all hope, she approached her mother as a stranger. No longer able to be mother and daughter, they were now two people meeting for the first time and attempting to engage with one another. Much to Sharon's amazement, their discussion soon turned to the topic of their children and Sharon heard her mother talk lovingly and with great accuracy about her daughter who, quite by coincidence, was also named Sharon. Having given up her insistence that she be seen as her mother's daughter, Sharon had found a way to experience that mutually significant and deeply-felt mother-daughter relationship for which she had longed.

As readers can ascertain, the first example challenges us to embrace the uncertain in that which we have made certain. The second example alerts us as to how we can limit the possibilities of uncertain circumstances when we insist upon imposing a preferred, but unavailable, certainty upon them.

## AN EXERCISE EXPLORING EXISTENTIAL UNCERTAINTY

Ask your self the following questions:

1. What is one thing, (a), about me that I feel truly certain about?
2. What is one thing, (b), about me that I feel truly uncertain about?
3. What is my felt experience of each? What is the same about "a" and "b"? What is different about them?
4. What would happen if I became uncertain about "a"?
5. What would happen if I became certain of "b"?
6. What is my felt experience of "a" having become uncertain? What is my felt experience of "b" having become certain? What is the same about these new experiences of "a" and "b"? What is different about them?

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