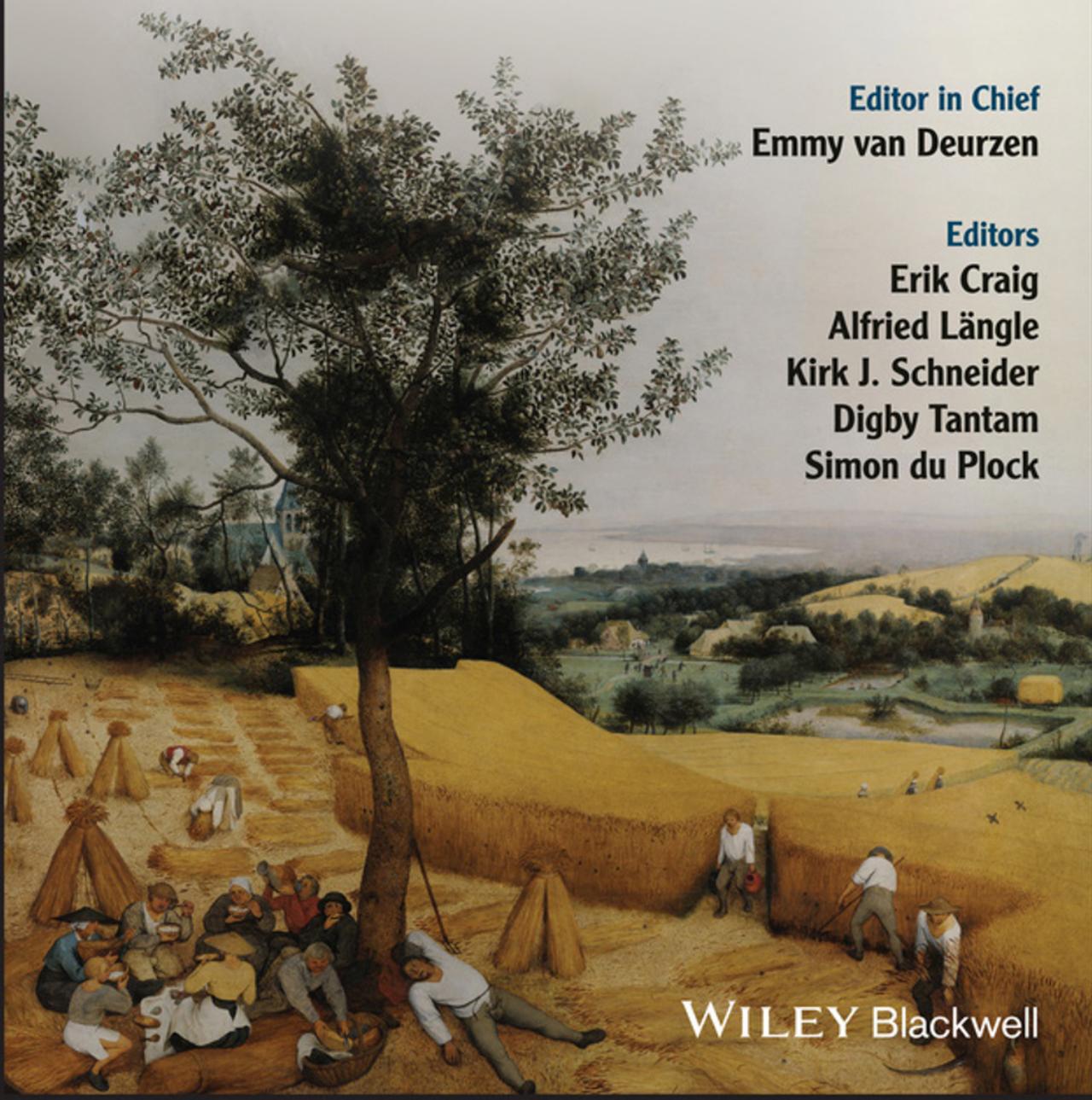


The Wiley World Handbook of  
**EXISTENTIAL  
THERAPY**

**Editor in Chief**  
**Emmy van Deurzen**

**Editors**  
**Erik Craig**  
**Alfried Längle**  
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# The Wiley World Handbook of Existential Therapy

Edited by

**Emmy van Deurzen (editor in chief)**

**Erik Craig**

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*To all existential therapists worldwide, past, present, and future.*

*In celebration of what it is to be human,  
In appreciation of the thinkers who came before us,  
and with gratitude to those who will take up the challenges after us.*



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## Conclusions

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# Acknowledgments

The editors would like to express their appreciation for the work that was put into this handbook by all the contributors to the various parts of the book. Without their expertise and dedication to existential therapy this book could not have been produced. We are particularly grateful to Mick Cooper for having worked so closely with us in writing the “Introduction.” We are also grateful to the anonymous reviewers of the first draft of this book. Their feedback made us think about our writing in a new way and was helpful in improving the standard of the book. Any and all mistakes and failings of the book remain our own. We look forward to having further feedback after publication and to producing a much more complex, updated second edition of the book some time in the future.

# Preface

This volume, which we can finally hold in our hands, is the joint achievement of a large group of people who have worked as existential psychotherapists, teachers, and researchers separately and independently in our own cultures for decades. Now, inspired by the First World Congress for Existential Therapy, we have found ourselves working together like members of a big family who are all inspired by the same desire to understand life and human existence better. We share the same goal of finding out how to gain and give greater access to the life knowledge and living wisdom that have been gathered over so many years, in order to pass these on to our clients and patients, our colleagues, our students, and indeed to ourselves, seeking to throw some much-needed light in the darkness.

Together we have worked on this amazing and unprecedented project for many months and we have savored the different textures, shapes, and flavors of existential therapy that it has brought out into the open. We hope that the rich international and multicultural vista that has unfolded will make the field both more accessible and more faithful to its founding vision.

We are all equally passionate about existential therapy and we have read many of the same original texts and have felt touched and inspired by them. Yet we each represent a different aspect of the many existential ways of working, in the same way in which individuals differ from each other.

In true phenomenological tradition, by bringing together these different facets of existential therapy we have been able to create a more accurate, in-depth picture of our field and have been able to cover a broader and wider area than any one of us might have done individually.

We have gained greater perspective by acknowledging our differences and we have found surer ground under our feet by recognizing our profound similarities. The entire project has been a fascinating adventure of discovery for all of us and we now offer you our varied views with the joy and pleasure of seeing them so closely bound together in one volume.

We hope that the clarity that this book brings will add focus and definition to your way of working. Yet we are adamant that the book, far from restricting or normalizing the existential method, will paradoxically provide greater freedom for each of us to

practice in our own individual manner, which may vary with each of our cultures, each of our backgrounds, each of our clients, each of our moments of practice. Existential therapy is a therapy of continuous change and diversity.

Committing to an experience-near-philosophical understanding of the human troubles with which our clients struggle, we celebrate the condition we all have in common: that of being present on this earth for the briefest of time and of aiming to make the most of the challenges and possibilities we encounter.

We entrust this volume to you, reader, in the hope that it will throw light on your path in the same way it has done for us, who edited and wrote it.

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Kirk J. Schneider, Digby Tantam, Simon du Plock, January 2019

# Introduction

## *What is Existential Therapy?*

Mick Cooper, Erik Craig, and Emmy van Deurzen<sup>1</sup>

What should we do with these lives that we have? These existences? Borne out of nothingness, hurtling towards annihilation.... How can we make sense of these fragile, fleeting moments of existence that we have been given? More precisely, how can we do justice to the being that has been bestowed upon us? This incomprehensible, awesome gift that is so easy to lose sight of: buried beneath the detritus of everyday mundanity.

Different therapies focus – no doubt helpfully – on different things. The cognitive approaches, for instance, explore our thoughts and our misperceptions; the psychodynamic approaches turn to our pasts and our modes of relating. But it is only in the existential therapies where our being – as a complex, whole gestalt – is taken as the focus of the work. Existential therapies explore our lives, as an engagement with existence and the world: they explore what it means to ex-ist, to stand out in the world. They investigate what it means to be here, right now, as a living being. Faced with choices, dilemmas and limitations existential therapies ask what it means to be human and how to best tackle our challenges, obstacles and problems. They explore – with courage, openness, and humility – the very grounds of human being.

### **What is existential therapy?**

So what, actually, is existential therapy? In 2014 and 2015, a group of leading international existential therapists facilitated by Stephen Diamond, under the auspices of the World Confederation for Existential Therapy, worked together to create a broad definition of the existential approach (see <http://www.existentialpsychotherapy.net/definition-of-existential-psychotherapy/>). After two years, and following numerous discussions, disagreements, and revisions, they reached a consensually agreed statement on

<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Simon du Plock, Alfred Längle, Kirk J. Schneider, Digby Tantom

the nature of existential therapy. This remains the most collaborative and comprehensive description of the approach available to date, albeit one likely to continue developing over time. Due to its historical significance, we reproduce it here in its entirety. The statement begins:

Existential therapy is a philosophically informed approach to counselling or psychotherapy. It comprises a richly diverse spectrum of theories and practices. Due partly to its evolving diversity, existential therapy is not easily defined. For instance, some existential therapists do not consider this approach to be a distinct and separate “school” of counselling or psychotherapy, but rather an attitude, orientation, or stance towards therapy in general. However, in recent years, existential therapy is increasingly considered by others to be a particular and specific approach unto itself. In either case, it can be said that though difficult to formalize and define, at its heart, existential therapy is a profoundly philosophical approach characterized in practice by an emphasis on relatedness, spontaneity, flexibility, and freedom from rigid doctrine or dogma. Indeed, due to these core qualities, to many existential therapists, the attempt to define it seems contradictory to its very nature.

As with other therapeutic approaches, existential therapy primarily (but not exclusively) concerns itself with people who are suffering and in crisis. Some existential therapists intervene in ways intended to alleviate or mitigate such distress when possible and assist individuals to contend with life’s inevitable challenges in a more meaningful, fulfilling, authentic, and constructive manner. Other existential therapists are less symptom-centered or problem-oriented and engage their clients in a wide-ranging exploration of existence without presupposing any particular therapeutic goals or outcomes geared toward correcting cognitions and behaviors, mitigating symptoms or remedying deficiencies. Nevertheless, despite their significant theoretical, ideological and practical differences, existential therapists share a particular philosophically-derived worldview which distinguishes them from most other contemporary practitioners.

Existential therapy generally consists of a supportive and collaborative exploration of patients’, or clients’, lives and experiences. It places primary importance on the nature and quality of the here-and-now therapeutic relationship, as well as on an exploration of the relationships between clients and their contextual lived worlds beyond the consulting room. In keeping with its strong philosophical foundation, existential therapy takes the human condition itself – in all its myriad facets, from tragic to wondrous, horrific to beautiful, material to spiritual – as its central focus. Furthermore, it considers all human experience as intrinsically inseparable from the ground of existence, or “being-in-the-world,” in which we each constantly and inescapably participate.

Existential therapy aims to illuminate the way in which each unique person – within certain inevitable limits and constraining factors – comes to choose, create and perpetuate his or her own way of being in the world. In both its theoretical orientation and practical approach, existential therapy emphasizes and honors the perpetually emerging, unfolding, and paradoxical nature of human experience, and brings an unquenchable curiosity to what it truly means to be human. Ultimately, it can be said that existential therapy confronts some of the most fundamental and perennial questions regarding human existence: ‘Who am I?’ ‘What is my purpose in life?’ ‘Am I free or determined?’ ‘How do I deal with my own mortality?’ ‘Does my existence have any meaning or significance?’ ‘How shall I live my life?’

The statement goes on to describe existential therapy in practice.

Existential therapists see their practice as a mutual, collaborative, encouraging and explorative dialogue between two struggling human beings – one of whom is seeking assistance from the other who is professionally trained to provide it. Existential therapy places special emphasis on cultivating a caring, honest, supportive, empathic yet challenging relationship between therapist and client, recognizing the vital role of this relationship in the therapeutic process.

In practice, existential therapy explores how clients' here-and-now feelings, thoughts and dynamic interactions within this relationship and with others might illuminate their wider world of past experiences, current events, and future expectations. This respectful, compassionate, supportive yet nonetheless very real encounter – coupled with a phenomenological stance – permits existential therapists to more accurately comprehend and descriptively address the person's way of being in the world. Taking great pains to avoid imposing their own worldview and value system upon clients or patients, existential therapists may seek to disclose and point out certain inconsistencies, contradictions or incongruence in someone's chosen but habitual ways of being... [The] therapeutic aim is to illuminate, clarify, and place these problems into a broader perspective so as to promote clients' capacity to recognize, accept, and actively exercise their responsibility and freedom: to choose how to be or act differently, if such change is so desired; or, if not, to tolerate, affirm and embrace their chosen ways of being in the world.

Existential therapy does not define itself predominantly on the basis of any particular predetermined technique(s). Indeed, some existential therapists eschew the use of any technical interventions altogether, concerned that such contrived methods may diminish the essential human quality, integrity, and honesty of the therapeutic relationship. However, the one therapeutic practice common to virtually all existential work is the phenomenological method. Here, the therapist endeavors to be as fully present, engaged, and free of expectations as possible during each and every therapeutic encounter by attempting to temporarily put aside all preconceptions regarding the process. The purpose is to gain a clearer contextual in-depth understanding and acceptance of what a certain experience might signify to this specific person at this particular time in his or her life.

The overall purpose of existential therapy, then, “is to allow clients to explore their lived experience honestly, openly and comprehensively.” It provides clients with an opportunity to look at their lives in depth and detail, and to find ways forward that may be more satisfying, fulfilling and rewarding. Existential therapy does not provide easy answers. From an existential perspective, there are no quick solutions. But through persistence, courage, and a willingness to look into the darkness, clients can be helped to make the most of the lives that they have.

## **Historical Foundations**

Most forms of contemporary existential psychotherapy owe their ancestry to the confluence of two distinguished streams of European thought and practice: first, to the *contemplative, wisdom traditions* of continental philosophy of nineteenth-century

existential thought, hermeneutics, and phenomenology, and, second, to the *psychological healing traditions* of depth psychology.

The *philosophical* ground for the very possibility of existential psychotherapy, well before it appeared as such, was laid by the venerable wisdom traditions of ancient Greece and Rome, but also in Persia, India, China, and Japan, which continue to inspire many existential therapists today. These old philosophies each describe human existence in their own way in order to arrive at better ways of living by entering into dialogue. All these philosophers, including Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno in the West and Zoroaster, Buddha, Confucius, Laozi, and many others in the East were committed to helping people live more thoughtfully and deliberately by having a clearer grasp of what life was about.

The *psychological healing* tradition of depth psychology also owes its origins to a synthesis of traditions, namely the religio-magical and medical-scientific healing traditions, both of which gradually developed through centuries of irregular but unremitting progress going back to the Greeks and before (Ellenberger 1970). Over the centuries following the Asklepiion healing temples of ancient Greece, pre-scientific mystical cures were performed both locally and regionally by various shamanistic, religious, and popular healers. It was not until Franz Mesmer (1734–1815) that a few notable physicians began developing more medical-scientific approaches to relieving psychological suffering. Although Mesmer's early medical efforts were initially abandoned they were picked up nearly a century later by the French physicians Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) and Pierre Janet (1859–1947), the German Neurologist Hippolyte Bernheim (1840–1919), and, eventually, Sigmund Freud, the founder of modern depth psychotherapy.

Whether speaking of either the wisdom or healing dimensions of practice, for existential therapists the notion of depth manifests in fundamental questions about human existence. Who are we? Why do we suffer? How might we best live while knowing in our living that we “owe” life our death? Even partial answers to these questions remain largely hidden from view, inaccessible. Eugen Bleuler (1910) was the first to refer to the scientific concern with this hiddenness as “depth psychology” (*Tiefenpsychologie*, p. 623). However, for phenomenologically oriented existential psychotherapists, the term depth psychology is understood spiritually or metaphorically and not in any substantial or topographical sense. The hermeneutic significance of depth is in its reference to the ontologically given circumstance that human existence is both finite and mysterious. Heidegger called the human being's phenomenologically given worldedness a clearing (*Lichtung*) that is simultaneously disclosive and concealing. When existential thinkers raise foundational questions about human existence, they know from the beginning that they do so in the face of two inescapable ontological conditions: our inherent human finitude and the fact that, as Heraclitus asserted, “things keep their secrets” (2001, p. 9).

The more ancient grounds for existential psychotherapy mentioned above lay largely fallow over many centuries, only to be tilled anew by three auspicious nineteenth-century intellectual developments in Europe, namely, early existential thought and literature, hermeneutics, and phenomenology.

## Existential thought and literature

Born on the heels of Romanticism and the Enlightenment, existential thinking first reappeared in the philosophical and creative literatures of the nineteenth century. Philosophically speaking, the works of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) variedly but significantly influenced such twentieth century existential thinkers as Heidegger, Camus, Sartre, Jaspers, Buber, and Tillich. Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche issued an implicit invitation to philosophers, psychologists, and lay persons alike to pay more attention to the human condition in its everydayness and especially in its problematic and paradoxical nature. For Schopenhauer that meant an emphasis on will, destiny, desire, love, sexuality, and human suffering; for Kierkegaard the focus was on individuality, subjectivity, anxiety, choice, responsibility, despair, and spiritual commitment; and for Nietzsche the important issues were fate, tragedy, power, transcendence, individuality, morality, and will.

Concurrent with these philosophers, the great nineteenth Century philo-psychological novelists, poets, and playwrights like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821–1881), and Hendrik Ibsen (1828–1906) embodied these same ideas in the characters they created. Faust, Werther, Raskolnikov, Prince Mishkin, the nameless protagonist of *Notes from the Underground*, Brand, Peer Gynt, Hedda Gabler, and The Master Builder, and Halvard Solness were all existential “heroes” who suffered human tragedies with which readers could resonate. They brought to life the new philosophical understanding and applied it to daily life, in the same way the ancient Greek philosophers were mirrored by the famous Greek tragedies. This combination of philosophers and writers helped prepare Western culture for what was to become, in the twentieth century, a concentrated gathering of philosophies concerned with the human condition, broadly referred to as existential philosophy.

Yet, in science and philosophy, ideas are not enough. Epistemology, new ways of investigating, knowing, and understanding are also necessary, and it was two new “sciences of understanding and knowing” that became most critical for the development of existential psychotherapy, namely hermeneutics and phenomenology.

## Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, as the art, science, and practice of interpretation precedes by millennia the practice of phenomenology, which itself is the predominant method of existential psychotherapy. The Greek verb *hermēneuein* means to interpret or to translate and refers to a process or method that aims to understand the implicit meaning of things, not only that which appears at first glance but also that which shows itself only gradually over time with a continuing, openly reflective gaze. To be hermeneutic is to be concerned with grasping, understanding, and translating meanings, especially those secreted meanings hibernating within the things themselves. The term is widely thought to be derived from the name of the Olympic god, Hermes, who was the emissary of the gods, passing and translating messages between gods as well as between gods and men. Palmer (1969) notes that “the Greek word, *hermeois* referred to

the priest at the Delphic Oracle” (p. 13). Heidegger also noted the relation of the word hermeneutic to the name Hermes in his 1923 summer course on *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity* (1988/1999) while also acknowledging the ultimate obscurity of its etymology. In any case, it is not known whether the word was derived from the name of the god or the name of the god from the word. Thus, appropriately enough in this case, Hermes was also known as a trickster.

Hermeneutic practice today refers to the process by which we gain an understanding of the meaning of things, particularly the hidden or so-called deep meanings. It is a way of making explicit what is implicit and of putting text into its context, while also revealing its so-called subtext. By paying close attention to what is initially hermeneutically sealed, we read the hidden depths of messages in order to bring them into awareness and understanding. One might say hermeneutics is a process of enlarging our awareness, moving, from mystery to meaning, from silence to speech, or from the concealed to the unconcealed.

Early use of the term hermeneutics is most commonly traced back to Aristotle’s *Peri hermēnaias* (*On Interpretation*). Although popularly associated with biblical exegesis, historically the use of the term also came to apply to interpretation in philology, jurisprudence, linguistics, and philosophy. The early-nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) established hermeneutics as a science in and of itself, independent of any particular discipline and coined the term “the hermeneutic circle” to designate the ongoing reciprocal contribution of the part and the whole, the word and the sentence, the phenomenon and its context in all human understanding. An admirer and biographer of Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) made the practice more widely accessible. Dilthey is still most widely recognized and remembered for his distinction between the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) first made in his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1883/1989). The following year, in *Ideas for a Descriptive and Analytic Psychology*, he explicated his focus on Life as it is lived and proposed hermeneutics as the only appropriate approach to the study of human beings (*Geisteswissenschaften*), particularly with reference to his own descriptive approach to psychology called the psychology of understanding (*Verstehens-Psychologie*). Dilthey’s work was devoted to an understanding of life, life itself, the meaning of our actually lived experience (*Erlebnis*) as such, particularly as it shows itself through the individual actually living that life in practice. For Dilthey objectifying measures and categories extrinsic to life were subservient to the spirited reality of life itself. Although his work influenced such twentieth-century philosophers as Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), and Martin Buber (1878–1965), it was his influence on Martin Heidegger that was to have the greatest impact on philosophy and the human sciences in the next century. Out of this would eventually emerge the practice of Daseinsanalysis as a specific approach to psychiatric and psychotherapeutic practice and, from this in turn, the development of existential psychotherapy in general. Heidegger’s revolutionary ontological hermeneutic understanding of Being and human being (*Dasein*) was directly responsible for what came to be called, in the twentieth century, the “hermeneutic turn” in philosophy and the human sciences, including psychology.

## Phenomenology

As the quintessential philosophical method for existential psychology and psychotherapy, phenomenology is an approach to knowledge and understanding based on the description and clarification of the phenomena we encounter in everyday life. It is an approach that returns us to our immediate experience of the world. In its pursuit of a radical freedom from prejudice and presupposition, it seeks to avoid the errors of what Husserl called the natural attitude, with which we draw our knowledge from belief, dogma, personal habits and history, politics, cultural customs, ulterior motives, and so forth. The term phenomenology comes from the Greek words *phainómenon*, meaning that which appears, shows itself, or, literally, “shines forth” and *logos* meaning word, discourse, or study. Thus phenomenology may be said to be an approach to studying phenomena in philosophy, science, the arts, and humanities that minimizes the influence of unexamined assumptions, biases, beliefs, concepts, or theories in order to remain as faithful as possible to what shows itself directly in experience. As Moran (2000) put it: “the programme of phenomenology sought to reinvigorate philosophy by returning it to the life of the living subject ... an appeal to return to concrete, lived human experience in all its richness” (p. 5). As with Schleiermacher and Dilthey in hermeneutics, two German philosophers stand out as phenomenological progenitors for existential psychotherapy and Daseinsanalysis: namely the philosopher and descriptive psychologist, Franz Brentano (1838–1917), and the pure or transcendental phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938).

A philosopher, psychologist, and, for some time, a priest, Franz Brentano served on the faculty of the University of Vienna where he taught, among many others, both Sigmund Freud and Edmund Husserl. During Brentano’s first year on the faculty in Vienna, Sigmund Freud, a medical student at the time, attended the philosopher’s classes with his friend, a future physiologist, Joseph Paneth. Brentano took a liking to both students and even invited them over to his home to discuss some of their objections to his philosophy. So influential was Brentano on the young Freud that the future founder of psychoanalysis considered taking his PhD in philosophy and, albeit only briefly, even struggled with considering theistic belief. Although Freud never acknowledged Brentano’s influence on his development of psychoanalysis, indications of the latter’s emphases on description and intentionality are implicitly represented in Freud’s thought.

Regardless of the uncertain impact Brentano may have had on Freud and psychoanalysis, there is no doubt about his impact on philosophy and phenomenology, especially through his influence on Carl Stumpf, Alexius Meinong, Martin Buber, and, most especially, Edmund Husserl. In Brentano’s *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874/2015), he distinguished between genetic and descriptive psychology (psychognosis), an approach he much later referred to as phenomenological psychology. Although Brentano’s descriptive psychology was a crucial forerunner of phenomenology, Spiegelberg (1972) considered it merely “phenomenology in the making” (p.5). Nevertheless, on his way to a science of mental phenomena, Brentano reintroduced the medieval scholastic concept of *intentionality*, designating the circumstance that every act of human consciousness includes within itself an object. As Brentano famously put it: “Every mental phenomenon includes something as object

within itself ... In presentation something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on" (Brentano 1874/1973, pp. 88–89). With the introduction of Brentano's concept of intentionality, the overcoming of the Cartesian duality between self and world was finally underway, a surpassing which found its penultimate consummation in Heidegger's understanding of the existing human as a unitary being-in-the-world, as *Da-sein*, literally, there-being. In fact, it was Heidegger's reading of Brentano's doctoral dissertation, while preparing for Jesuit priesthood in 1907, that sent the then 18-year-old Heidegger on his lifelong path of questioning the meaning of Being.

Building on Brentano's early contributions to the development of a phenomenological psychology, his student, Edmund Husserl, became most widely regarded as the father of "the phenomenological movement," which Spiegelberg (1972) considered to have been "initiated by Husserl around 1910" (p. xxxii). Studying with Brentano ten years after Freud, Husserl was explicitly indebted to Brentano's life-philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*), especially his understanding of intentionality, descriptive psychology, and as the study of consciousness. It was on the foundation of Brentano's thought that Husserl went on to develop his own understanding of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*), that entire, dynamic, ontical horizon of phenomena that constitutes our lives as lived and can only be known as it appears to us in consciousness. In order to overcome Cartesian dualism, Husserl (1913/1931) bridged the gap between Descartes' subject and object, by speaking instead in terms of *noesis and noema* to describe the constitution of all acts of consciousness by the subjective cogito (*nous*). Using an example from the context of social life, including that form of social existence called psychotherapy, noesis refers to the process of perceiving-of-the-other whereas noema refers to the-other-as-perceived. Thus, any such act of social consciousness is constituted as the-perceiving-of-the-other-as-perceived. Uniting all acts of consciousness in this way brought the human being even closer to its world. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology sought to remain as close as possible to phenomena just as they show themselves directly, immanently in experience. With Husserl's transcendental reduction we seek to find a space in which the process of perception aims for essences rather than appearances. In order to achieve such an uncontaminated perception of the essence (*eidōs*) or meaning of things, Husserl revived the Hellenist skeptic's principle of epoché (*epokhē*) – also called phenomenological reduction or, simply, bracketing – which means the suspension of belief or judgement.

For Husserl, phenomenological reduction was the necessary first step to return "to the things themselves" (1900/2001, p. 168), to let things speak for themselves in their living immediacy. This first step is about filtering, clarifying, even purifying the very process of our consciousness to the extent that this is possible in each case. This step then leads to the eidetic reduction, where we take awareness of the noema in its most essential manifestation, by using minute description, imaginative variation, and verification. Ultimately this will enable the transcendental reduction where we find that place of inter-subjectivity where our subjective consciousness connects to consciousness in general. Husserl's most famous student, Martin Heidegger, whose thought lies at the center of most twentieth-century philosophy, wrote that his own research "would not have been possible if the ground had not been prepared by Edmund Husserl" (Heidegger 1927/1962, p.62).