

CHAPTER 63



Tangled Integration

Weaving Together Philosophy, Science, and Practice to Advance Existential Ideas

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In this chapter we bring together three distinct perspectives—existential philosophy (past and present), current scientific research on well-being and health inspired by existential thinking, and ongoing practice to bring existentialism to the public square and increase its accessibility outside of academia. A guiding premise is that existentialism calls for a broad multidisciplinary approach, and that the juxtaposition of these differing perspectives reveals useful insights as well as needed future directions. The larger objective is to usher in a new era of existential thinking that draws on the past and engages with contemporary societal challenges to sharpen the value of existential ideas to improve the human condition.

What follows is organized into four parts. The first section, written by an existential philosopher, examines core meanings of existentialism, drawing on the writings of seminal thinkers from the 19th and 20th centuries. Foremost among these is the idea that *existence precedes essence*, along with other themes: *transcendence*, *freedom*, *authenticity*, and *ethics*. These ideas are explicated with a commitment to clarify how they were a response to the historical and cultural conditions in which they emerged. This return to original sources is important, given that

many trained in subfields of psychology may not have had in-depth exposure to foundational writings of existentialism.

The second section, written by a research psychologist, examines how existential ideas were brought to the scientific arena via a eudaimonic model of psychological well-being, which drew on clinical, developmental, existential, and humanistic views about positive psychological functioning. Key components in this model are described, followed by a selective look at research findings, such as how meaning making matters for diverse aspects of health and how long people live. Also addressed are current societal stressors that are undermining purposeful life engagement and self-realization for many, particularly those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

The third section, written by a clinical practitioner, addresses initiatives to take existential ideas beyond the sequestered halls of academia into the public square. The focus is on a series of global existential summits offered over recent years via online prerecorded interviews with wide-ranging scholars and practitioners who actively use existential ideas in their work. Rich are the lived experiences of those interviewed, some of whom offer insightful critiques of existen-

tialism as the purview of privileged players from the West. The need to decolonize European existential perspectives is elaborated from multiple vantage points.

A fourth section examines the insights revealed from this tangled integration of philosophy, science, and practice. These include the need to (1) recognize Western and privileged biases in much existential philosophy and science; (2) acknowledge tensions, sometimes constructive, between philosophy and science as well as the need to broaden the focus beyond the individual; and (3) spotlight contemporary societal problems, especially widening inequality fueled by greed in some sectors. These realities call for a return to themes of virtue, ethics, and morality, longstanding priorities in classical existential philosophy.

Below we briefly set the stage for what follows by underscoring a core existential principle—that all human experience is historically and contextually bound. This recognition calls for an understanding of the contextual factors that led to the emergence of existential thinking in the mid-19th century and its sociocultural expansion in the mid-20th century. These past contexts are later juxtaposed with our current context to sharpen appreciation of timeliness of existential ideas amid changing realities.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF EXISTENTIALISM

Existential philosophy began to take shape in Europe in the mid-19th century with the pioneering work of the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard and the German philosopher Nietzsche. These ideas gained purchase in German universities and scholarly circles in the first two decades of the 20th century under the influence of prominent figures such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Jaspers. By the 1950s and 1960s, the ideas erupted beyond the cloistered walls of the academy under the newly coined moniker “existentialism” and were popularized by influential French figures such as Sartre and Beauvoir. Existentialism spilled into the streets of Paris in the form of student and worker protests, in counterculture revolutions, in the civil and women’s rights movements, in the radical politics of the New Left in Britain

and the United States, and in anticolonial activism protesting, among other things, the French occupation of Algeria and Vietnam. By the mid-20th-century existentialism had become one of the most significant cultural and political movements in the intellectual history of the West.

What was notable about that historical context? Turning to Nietzsche’s (1882/2001) groundbreaking work *The Gay Science*, we find the Madman announcing that God is dead. Jumping into the midst of a bustling crowd gathered in the marketplace, he shouted, “I seek God! I seek God . . . Where has God gone? I’ll tell you where! We’ve killed him—you and I! We are all his murderers!” (p. A 125). This proclamation struck his European audience like a lightning bolt, especially the claim that they were somehow responsible for his murder. The context for the Madman’s announcement was an entire generation living through a period of radical sociocultural transformation, where earlier ways of life rooted in a close-knit sense of community, belongingness, and social integration were being destroyed and replaced by an increasingly alienating and impersonal social order ruled by principles of science, mechanization, and technology. For Nietzsche, a pernicious faith in God was replaced with an equally pernicious faith in science. Other utopian advocates, including Marx, J. S. Mill, and N. Chernyshevsky embraced this scientific vision to rationally redesign and automate society in accordance with naturalistic and mathematical laws, thereby releasing human beings from unnecessary labor and maximizing human happiness.

Built into this emergent secularism was the materialist assumption that humans are physical beings and thus subject to the laws of nature, causally responding to environmental stimuli. According to this view, the primary motivation for all human action, despite its apparent complexity, was the desire to avoid pain and pursue pleasure. Nonetheless, amid the optimism to modify human behavior based on scientific principles to create a happier, well-ordered society, the seeds of revolt were being sown. Along with Nietzsche, a renegade group of philosophers, theorists, and literary figures began to push back against the ascendant scientism, pointing out how nihilistic and

corrosive an uncritical faith in the power of scientific progress and technique were, especially when it came to the deepest, most unsettling problems of the human condition. Put simply, positivism could not address the ultimate questions of existence: “Who am I?”; “How should I live?”; and “What is the purpose and meaning my life?” For these thinkers, a different kind of science was needed, a human or existential science whose concerns could not be mathematized and assigned a truth-value based on empirical verification. It was this historical back-drop that gave birth to existentialism and, subsequently, to existential psychology.

WHAT IS EXISTENTIALISM?

Unlike Marxism, existentialism does not have an orthodoxy and does not refer to a fixed ideology or system. This may help explain why none of the major figures self-identified with the word *existentialism*. As Beauvoir wrote, “My inspiration came from my own experience, not from a system” (1963/1992, p. 38). Existentialism, in this view, is best understood *not* as a philosophical school or system but as an affective and embodied orientation (or way of seeing) that pays close attention to lived experience and confronts (and works to accept and integrate) the painful givens of the human condition. Rather than proceeding from a set of ready-made principles, the methodological starting point proceeds from the “I am”—from the first-person experience of existence itself.

From the perspective of empirical science this can be viewed as heresy in at least two important ways. First, existentialism begins not from a perspective of scientific detachment and objectivity but from within the concrete struggle of life *as it is lived*, where the researcher pays attention, listens, and documents, however imperfectly, the experiences of human beings in their own worldly contexts. It adopts an “insider’s perspective” (Aho, 2020) to illuminate the flesh and blood particulars of individual and collective experience and exposes the ways in which social, political, and economic conditions limit and constrain the possibility of realizing one’s own potential, what classical existentialists refer to as *authenticity*

(*authenticité, Eigentlichkeit*) and what we will be calling *eudaimonic well-being* (Ryff, 1989, 2018). Because it begins from within the situated activity of existence itself, the science of existential psychology is inherently flawed and incomplete because the subject matter is irreducibly complex. The best it can do is describe experience by attending to the stories and narratives of human beings as they confront who they are and struggle with their situation. The goal, as the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty wrote, is “not one of explaining or analyzing” existence; it is, rather, “a matter of describing” existence in its full concreteness by attending to the phenomena in all its richness, mystery, and diversity (1945/1962, p. viii).

This awareness leads to the second existential heresy, namely, that it explodes the boundaries of the academy and the rigid disciplinary silos that separate the arts, sciences, and humanities. Indeed, many of the most powerful expressions of the human condition are found not in the dry and turgid prose of academic philosophy or psychology, but in literary figures. For example, those created by the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and the Irish dramatist Samuel Beckett. Indeed, many of existentialism’s most influential philosophers were best known not for their jargon-filled tomes, but for their accessible fiction, novels, plays, and short stories. Sartre and Camus both won Nobel Prizes in Literature and Beauvoir won the prestigious literary award, *le Prix Goncourt*. But the reach of existentialism stretched far beyond the written word. We see core ideas played out on the big screen by Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman, Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni, and American moviemaker Terrence Malik. We witness the horror and flux of the human condition displayed on the canvases of the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, the French modernist Marcel Duchamp, and the American “drip-style” work of Jackson Pollock. Documentaries and long-form journalism also give voice to the lived experience of the migrant worker, Indigenous peoples, those who are mentally ill, those who are aged and disabled, impoverished classes in the racialized South and urban ghettos, and those left alienated in the hollowed-out cities of the postindustrial rust belt, where opioid

addiction and “deaths of despair” are destroying countless lives.

This broad interdisciplinary approach allows existential psychology to expand beyond its Eurocentric origins. As we document, one of the significant developments of contemporary existentialism is the way it is being decolonized, challenging the socioeconomically privileged, White, and (mostly) male representation by engaging the experience of those who have traditionally been underrepresented and marginalized, especially those in the Global South (Aho et al., 2024). Existentialism’s critique of methodological detachment and its focus on the concrete particulars of everyday life provides access to the situated and oppressive nuances of colonialism in Latinx (Ortega, 2016), Black (Gordon, 2020), and aboriginal (Coulthard, 2014) experience. This integration opens fresh paths to expand understanding of alterity within Euro-American culture, including experiences of marginalization and oppression in queer (Ahmed, 2006), aging (Aho, 2022) chronically ill (Toombs, 1995), and disabled (Reynolds, 2022) identities.

The Core Ideas

Despite the disjointed wellspring of sources that engage and reflect existential concerns, there is nonetheless a set of unifying ideas that existential psychology draws on to articulate what is unique about the human condition, beginning with the recognition that human existence is a temporal activity, a finite process of becoming who we are. Understanding human existence as a temporal, historically situated, activity or *way of being* means there is no pregiven nature or essence that determines who and what we are. This sets up what is arguably existentialism’s most significant contribution to our understanding of what it means to be human.

Existence Precedes Essence

Existentialism reverses the traditional idea that a pregiven essence necessarily grounds existence, and this leads to the central principle: *existence precedes essence*. Individuals are thrown into an existence that they did not choose, and it is only then that they begin to create who they are through mo-

ment-to-moment choices and actions. Sartre (1946/2001) called this the “first principle of existentialism,” namely that “man first exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself” (pp. 292–293). As self-defining beings, humans are unique among other animals because humans alone exist *for ourselves*. Humans are self-conscious and free to create themselves through their own meaning-giving projects and commitments. This means humans are always *other* than who they are because they are ceaselessly negating former identities and self-interpretations through their choices. Existence, on this view, is an ongoing process of self-making, but this process is not unrestricted or absolute. It is always mediated or conditioned by the facts of the situation they’ve been thrown into. Humans exist, then, in a state of relational tension with the freedom of self-creation on the one hand and factual determinations that limit them on the other.

Transcendence

Existence is always conditioned by social, economic, political, and biophysical circumstances, but one is not wholly at the mercy of these circumstances. As a self-conscious being, one can surpass or “transcend” them by confronting them, giving them meaning, and taking action to transform them. This tension between “facticity” and “transcendence” means that one freely makes oneself, but it is also true that one is already made. Recognizing existence as a tension is especially instructive for existential psychology, as it allows for a more granular, nuanced, and qualitative understanding of the ways in which the process of self-creation is restricted and confined by social conditions related to intersectional issues such as race, class, gender, religious orientation, physical and mental (dis)ability, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Freedom

The human capacity to transcend or rise above facticity points to a uniquely human form of suffering or anguish that arises from human’s inescapable freedom. If there is no pregiven essence that defines who humans are, this also means there are no moral ab-

solutes that can provide security, guidance, and direction in their lives. This is what Nietzsche (1882/2001) meant when he referred to “God’s death.” In the secular age, one is left abandoned and adrift, facing what he called “a terrifying infinity” (p. A 124). This uncanny feeling of anguish was described by the existentialists in different ways—as dread (Kierkegaard), anxiety (Heidegger), nausea (Sartre), absurdity (Camus)—but they all referred to the same unsettling realization, that existence is fundamentally insecure, unstable, and groundless, and that from the moment of birth one’s being is threatened by the possibility of nonbeing, by death. This focus on the revelatory power of moods reveals another break with the tradition of mainstream science. Knowledge of the human condition is disclosed to humans not by adopting a perspective of theoretical detachment (or “view from nowhere”); rather individuals understand who they are by means of how they feel, and these feelings have the power to shatter their worlds, shaking them out of comfortable routines and ready-made identities. When the world collapses in this way, humans are awakened to the groundlessness and absurdity of the human condition and forced to confront the ultimate questions: “Who am I?” and “What is the meaning of my life?” It is here, amid the collapse, that the journey of self-becoming truly begins.

Authenticity

The transformative power of existential feelings reveals that humans spend most of their lives living in shallow self-deception, blindly conforming to the norms, values, and expectations of the public world. They live, in Nietzsche’s (1889/1998, p. 106) words, as “herd animals,” believing that they are living well because they are doing what everyone else is doing. This way of life may be predictable and comforting, but it is mired in inauthenticity (or “bad faith”) because it compels humans to turn away from who they are and become a “they-self.” For the existentialist, a valuable or praiseworthy life has little to do with social convention, happiness, or even being a good person. The aim is to be authentic, to *be true* to oneself, to realize one’s own unique potential as a form of eudaimonic well-being. As Kierke-

gaard illustrated by drawing on the biblical figure of Abraham, there may be (and usually are) times in life when one must, in a state of “fear and trembling,” decide between being a good person (being moral) and being true to oneself (being authentic). The existentialist demands that one choose the latter, confront who one is and, in doing so, temporarily suspend one’s obligations to socially prescribed moral principles for the sake of something higher, namely one’s own personal truth. This explains why themes of revolt, rebellion, and deliverance from the crowd are common in existential philosophy and literature. Being authentic does not, however, mean that one stops caring for others or stops working to transform oppressive social conditions. It is quite the opposite, although there is a risk to other-directed behavior. It can manifest as a form of self-evasion disguised as moral action, where one distracts oneself, fleeing from one’s own groundlessness by immersing oneself in the service of knowing and helping others. For the existentialist, the point in privileging authenticity over conventional morality is one of ontological priorities.

Ethics

Prioritizing authenticity over morality suggests there are no moral absolutes, no enduring ethical prescriptions or values that one ought to adhere to. But this does not mean human existence is an amoral event. The point for the existentialist is that it is not God, but existence *qua* freedom that is the source of all value. Being a professor or husband, for example, has worth and value one chooses for it. But choices do not take place in isolation because existence is fundamentally relational; they are bound up in the lives and choices of others. This relational ontology suggests that one is not a solitary, voluntaristic subject but a “being-in-the-world” and a “being-with-others” that invariably places moral demands on oneself. It entails responsibility and obligations to care for others so they can realize and accept their freedom. Here we see that being authentic and being moral are two sides of the same coin. The goal then is to help others confront and accept the painful givens of freedom and finitude but also work to expose socioeconomic and political condi-

tions that prevent this authentic confrontation and the possibility for eudaimonic well-being. We suggest that the capacity to be true to oneself, to flourish as an individual is a privilege when most human beings are thrown into conditions of oppression, subjugation, and material scarcity where the possibility for self-realization is severely restricted. In these conditions, individuals are unable to follow Nietzsche's (1882/2001) imperative, one that commands, "You shall become who you are!" (p. A 270).

To address conditions that restrict an individual or group's capacity for eudaimonic well-being, we contend that the science of existential psychology casts a wide interdisciplinary net. It is an inherently messy and disheveled science that draws on and integrates the insights not just of philosophers, social scientists, public policy experts, and allied health professionals but of writers, poets, artists, filmmakers, documentarians, and journalists. This tangled integration is essential to illuminate complexities of the human condition and constraints and forms of oppression unique to each situation. Most importantly, it opens a discursive space that allows for what Sartre (1968, p. 94) called "social possibles" to be lived, creating a crack in the wall where underrepresented and underprivileged classes can finally emerge from the shadows to be recognized and heard, making it possible to glimpse at a future of deep meaning and self-realization that is no longer blocked off.

In the next section we explore psychological research on eudaimonic well-being from a broad multidisciplinary perspective that draws on existential, humanistic, and developmental perspectives to articulate ideas of meaning and purpose, growth and self-realization, autonomy and mastery. These, as empirical findings show, are contoured by sociodemographic factors and life experiences, and they are also consequential for diverse aspects of health.

EXISTENTIAL IDEAS IN SCIENCE: STUDIES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND HEALTH

More than two decades ago, Ryan and Deci (2001) partitioned the science of well-being into two broad traditions: one dealing with

happiness (hedonic well-being) and the other dealing with human potential (eudaimonic well-being). Both are part of wide-ranging research on "subjective well-being" that has been studied empirically since the middle of the last century—for over 70 years (Ryff, 2024a). Much early work examined Americans' reports of their happiness and life satisfaction (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Campbell et al., 1976) and linked such perceptions to various economic indicators. Similar questions were later the focus of psychological research on subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1999), framed as hedonic psychology (Kahneman et al., 1999). Little of this work engaged with existential ideas, theory, or philosophy.

Eudaimonic well-being, in contrast, attends to theories and philosophies about the human condition, including existentialism. Here we focus on a model of well-being (Ryff, 1985, 1989) that grew out of clinical, developmental, existential, and humanistic frameworks as well as seminal insights from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1925). Addressed below are key components of well-being in this model, how they have been studied, and what kinds of findings have grown up around them. The latter offer evidence for how well-being matters, both in individual lives and in terms of broader societal functioning. Parenthetically, we note another eudaimonic approach, namely, self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000), which is concerned with human motivation. Three basic psychological needs are posited: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. A key idea in SDT research is that satisfaction of these needs fosters both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. SDT is thus not a theory about well-being; rather, it is a theory about basic human needs thought to matter for subjective well-being, broadly defined.

What Is Eudaimonic Well-Being?

Center stage in the model put forth by Ryff (1989; Ryff & Singer, 2008) were ideas about human growth, development, and self-realization. Multiple sources were drawn on to explicate what human becoming is, such as Erikson's (1959) formulation of ego development, Buhler's writings about the basic life tendencies (Bühler, 1935; Bühler & Mas-

sarik, 1968), and Neugarten's (1968, 1973) descriptions of personality development in middle and later adulthood. Also relevant were Maslow's (1968) views of self-actualization, Rogers's (1961) formulation of the fully functioning person, Allport's (1961) conception of maturity, and Jung's (1933; von Franz, 1964) description of individuation. Existential thinking was strongly evident in Frankl's (1959/1985) emphasis on meaning making in the face of adversity. Jahoda (1958) drew on some of these perspectives to distill the nature of positive mental health.

In the background were enduring ideas from Aristotle's (1925) *Ethics*, where he asserted that happiness was the highest of all human goods achievable by human action. However, he emphasized differences in what "the general run of men and people of superior refinement" say that happiness is. For the former, it is some "plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honor," but Aristotle likened this to a life suitable for beasts. Instead, he defined the highest human good as "activity of the soul in accord with virtue" (see Ryff & Singer, 2008, pp. 15–16). He then asked what was the highest of all virtues and proposed that eudaimonia was the answer. Defined as achieving the "best thing in us," eudaimonia is thus a kind of personal excellence unique to each person's talents and capacities. As we saw earlier, much of what existentialists refer to as "authenticity" is manifestation of a virtuous and praiseworthy life grounded in one's capacity to "realize" and "be true" to oneself. Johnston (1997) captured this telos of self-realization when he wrote, "The excellence of the human being is thus going to be associated with growth towards some final realization of his or her true and best nature" (p. 6).

The central contribution of Ryff (1989; Ryff & Singer, 2008) was to identify points of convergence in these many formulations. Rather than build a eudaimonic model of well-being around a single conceptualization, the aim was to show that many of them pointed toward similar aspects of positive psychological functioning. These were distilled as six key dimensions of well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Definitions

for each of these dimensions came from the underlying conceptual frameworks—that is what makes the model theory-driven. Many of these aspects of well-being address key existential challenges of living: having goals to live for, finding meaning and purpose in life, living authentically according to one's inner convictions, knowing and being true to oneself, and above all, making the most of one's talents and capacities. Despite their appeal in articulating the upside of the human condition, these ideas had been absent in scientific studies of well-being because tools to assess them did not exist.

Thus, a second key contribution of Ryff (1989) was to construct self-report scales designed to measure these various aspects of well-being. Self-descriptive items were written to capture the meaning of high and low scorers for each dimension. The items were then subjected to extensive psychometric evaluation (Keyes et al., 2002; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), including numerous assessments of item-to-scale correlations, multiple types of validity (face, content, convergent and discriminant, factorial) and reliability (internal consistency, test–retest). Measurement of inner experience is inherently imperfect, although extensive evidence supports the psychometric qualities of these instruments, when scales of sufficient length are used.

What Scientific Findings about Eudaimonic Well-Being Have Revealed

Translated in 40 languages, more than 1,950 publications have been generated with the above model of well-being. Much work has been conducted within the MIDUS (Midlife in the United States) national longitudinal study as well as its sister study MIDJA (Midlife in Japan) (see <https://midus.wisc.edu>). These endeavors are deeply multidisciplinary in scope: Included are many subfields of psychology (cognition, emotion, personality, stress and coping) as well as population-based disciplines (demography, epidemiology, sociology) and biological/physiological domains, genomics, and neuroscience. Importantly, MIDUS and MIDJA data are publicly available—researchers from all over the world can access the data (no permissions required). The response from the scientific community has been dra-

matic: Over 2,200 publications covering 34 different topic areas have been generated by the 30,000-plus users of the data.

Before highlighting select findings, it is useful to reflect on why this model of well-being has attracted so much attention (see Ryff, 2018). One answer may be that the model integrates intellectually vital ideas and ideals about what constitutes the best within humans (as emphasized by Aristotle). Another reason may be these diverse aspects of well-being have wide-ranging relevance and versatility—the scales have been used to study adult development, work and family life, health and biology, and neuroscience. A third reason, not articulated by Ryff (2018) but emphasized here, is that the model engages with core existential challenges of life: finding meaning and purpose, striving to realize personal capacities, knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, and living authentically according to personal convictions. These qualities resonate with researchers and practitioners around the globe.

Multiple prior reviews have summarized wide-ranging findings from the above model (Miyamoto & Ryff, 2022; Ryff, 2014, 2024b; Ryff et al., 2021). We select examples of findings below, including factors that may compromise the well-being and health of many. The latter reveals the need to bring social equity and justice to studies of well-being.

Factors That Influence Experiences of Well-Being

How well-being changes as individuals journey across the decades of adult life has garnered extensive attention. Findings show downward trajectories for personal growth and purpose from midlife into old age, thus pointing to conditions of agism and unique challenges faced by contemporary elders to remain meaningfully engaged in life. Alternatively, upward age trajectories have been observed for environmental mastery and positive relations. Educational status also matters: Better-educated adults have higher levels of all aspects of eudaimonic well-being. Such disparities also endure over time, with recent evidence showing persistent disadvantage in well-being over 20 years among the

less educated (Boylan et al., 2025). Minority status (Blacks compared to Whites) has surprisingly emerged as a positive predictor of well-being, suggesting that the challenges of racism may hone qualities of purpose and growth.

Family experience also matters, as helping others in family roles is linked with enhanced reports of purpose and self-acceptance. Married adults show higher well-being, compared to divorced, widowed, or never married individuals, although single women showed higher profiles on autonomy and personal growth compared to married women. Parenting is linked with enhanced well-being, whereas the loss of a child predicts impaired well-being decades later. Loss of a parent in childhood predicts lower adult well-being. Childhood adversity predicts lower purpose in life in adulthood; purpose also moderates the link between early emotional abuse/neglect and depressive symptoms in adulthood.

Studies Linking Psychological Well-Being to Health

Eudaimonic well-being has been linked with a wide array of biological measures, including better glycemic regulation, reduced inflammatory profiles, better lipid profiles, lower risk of metabolic syndrome, and lower allostatic load (a summary index of physiological risk). These biological assessments, in turn, are linked with reduced risk for various disease outcomes such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke, and osteoporosis. Eudaimonia has also been linked with brain assessments: Those with higher eudaimonic well-being showed less amygdala activation in response to negative stimuli and more activation of brain regions that help regulate emotions. Those with higher eudaimonia also showed sustained activation of reward circuitry in response to positive stimuli, which was further linked with lower stress hormones (cortisol output) over the course of the day. Other work has linked eudaimonic well-being with greater insular cortex volume that is involved in an array of higher-order cognitive functions. Taken together, these wide-ranging linkages between inner experiences of well-being with diverse biological and brain-based measures under-

score the fundamental importance of human subjectivity in making sense of variation in physiological systems as well as the structure and function of parts of the brain. Effectively, the work demonstrates how one's inner self and biological workings are tied together in ways that matter fundamentally for health.

Arguably the most dramatic findings of relevance for existentialists pertain to what has been learned about links between purpose in life and longevity. Extensive science in population-based disciplines (demography, epidemiology, sociology) is built around the study of death—that is, mortality and its causes. This is ground zero for existentialists. A stunning finding is that those with higher purpose in life live longer. This protective benefit of perceiving one's life as having meaning and direction has been documented in multiple large datasets that control for numerous confounds, such as prior health status. The first such result emerged from a community-based study of memory and aging, but later work from numerous national and international studies, including a meta-analysis involving data from 10 prospective studies, has shown that higher purpose in life is a protective factor against death.

Illuminating how this benefit for longevity might work, other studies have shown that those with higher levels of purpose in life have reduced risk of multiple disease outcomes (Alzheimer's disease, heart disease, stroke), and relatedly, that those with higher eudaimonic well-being are more likely to use preventive health care services and to practice better health behaviors (diet, exercise). What then is the larger import of findings showing protective health benefits from perceiving one's life as meaningful and purposeful? Essentially it is this: Although decades of past health research have focused on pathways to illness and disease, eudaimonic well-being, with its strong ties to existential and humanistic thinking, brings knowledge of the upside to the fore—namely, what keeps people healthy and well so they can enjoy long lives. Such benefits require, however, well-functioning societies that protect citizens from undue stress. Growing evidence shows that life is increasingly difficult for those who are disadvantaged.

CONTEMPORARY EXISTENTIAL CHALLENGES: WIDENING INEQUALITY AND THE PANDEMIC

Sadly, socioeconomic inequality has grown ever more dramatic of late, particularly in the United States. Recent historical stressors, such as the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, have further exacerbated problems of inequality (Ryff, 2023). Extensive research has examined what discrepant life opportunities mean for well-being and health. In MIDUS, focus has been on two national samples, one recruited in 1995 and another in 2012. Over this period of time, educational attainment in the United States improved. Yet despite such gains, the later sample had less household income, lower financial stability, worse general health, more chronic conditions, more functional limitations, and lower levels of well-being (autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, positive affect, and life satisfaction) than the baseline sample (Kirsch et al., 2019). Additional findings showed that poorer mental health in the later sample occurred among those of lower socioeconomic status (Goldman et al., 2018).

These findings bring into high relief troublesome realities of the larger societal context—that is, the opioid epidemic, growing alcoholism, and increased deaths due to suicide, collectively referred to as “deaths of despair” (Case & Deaton, 2015, 2020). Others have brought attention to growing homelessness (evictions) (Desmond, 2016) and the extent to which many (employers, landlords, banks, payday lenders) profit from the poor (Desmond, 2023). Other current science shows an increased sense of entitlement, narcissism, and tendency to behave unethically among upper-class compared to lower-class individuals (Piff, 2014). A large panel study of over 65,000 U.S. students (Mendelberg et al., 2017) revealed that those from affluent backgrounds were more likely to disagree with the statement “wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now.”

Philanthropy, traditionally thought to exemplify commitment among elites to do good in the world, is also under scrutiny (Giridharadas, 2018). The Sackler family, contributors to major art museums around the world, owned Purdue Pharma that cre-

ated oxycontin, the highly addictive, over-prescribed opioid painkiller. Purdue Pharma also marketed new drugs to treat the opioid addiction they helped create. From 1999 to 2021, over half a million people in the United States died from overdoses involving opioids (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Nan Goldin's 2022 documentary, *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed* (www.imdb.com/title/tt21374850/), enacts advice from the ancient Greeks to publicly censure greed, as has the removal of the Sackler family name from art museums around the world.

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated problems of ever widening inequalities (Ryff, 2023). The main message is that current existential challenges are not evenly distributed across the social order but disproportionately accrue to those who are disadvantaged. Effectively, eudaimonic well-being is increasingly sequestered among privileged, well-educated, economically comfortable segments of society (Ryff, 2024b), while feelings of anger and shame (Mishra, 2017), along with heightened stress exposures, are concentrated among the disadvantaged. These realities demand attention—in philosophical circles, in scientific inquiry, and in wider public awareness. The next section brings these challenges and others out of the shadows into the public sphere via the global existential summits.

THE PRACTICE AND GLOBAL DISSEMINATION OF EXISTENTIAL IDEAS

Existential philosophies have the potential to offer wisdom, inspiration, and hope for humanity, yet academia's technical and ostracizing jargon regulates their dissemination. Projects such as the global existential summits (GESs; 2025) and Existential Offerings (n.d.) prioritize representation and accessibility, recognizing that while different existential philosophies have *similar themes*, each philosopher contributes unique perspectives providing different "existential offerings" with which one may or may not resonate.

Real life is not in textbooks or journals; it is lived. These projects actively seek to illuminate the human behind the theory, em-

phasizing the importance of theory being disclosed alongside personal experience, moving the viewer in a human-to-human resonance, which dry academic prose cannot. The GES speakers' personal journeys reveal a common relationship that many develop toward existential philosophies: They give words to something within one that one feels but cannot express—a sense of home. However, the stories of many illuminated a darker side of existential traditions. Many were led by personal and intergenerational histories of existential agony, and stark lived realities of marginalization and oppression.

Obvious were the differing explanations of the origins of existential ideas. GES speakers trained in Eurocentric Western canons near-exclusively referenced the "Eurocentric Elite": Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Camus, Sartre, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and Frankl. Speakers hailing from outside the Eurocentric Western canons told a different story. Theoretically, they shared influences throughout history from across the globe and notably emphasized transdisciplinary contributions such as artists, musicians, activists, and spiritual leaders. Personally, they shared lived experience and awareness of colonization within today's world, many directly impacted by elitism and racism inherent in academia and engrained within collective consciousness. The following considers what these existential summits have brought into focus.

Existential Perspectives on Elitism: Privilege and Knowledge Hoarding

Existential curiosity is historically and universally a human attribute unbound by demographics such as race, class, or gender, yet the privileges of existing within elitist professions like academia are disproportionately unavailable to most of humanity, resulting in sociocultural disparities in the production and hoarding of knowledge (Fraser, 2024). The dominant culture situates the geography of reason in the West (Gordon, 2023), producing and disseminating knowledge to and from specific sociocultural systems that benefit from disproportionate research and funding. This system directly impedes developing countries that fall victim to the ramifications of academic capitalism (Ellers et al.,

2017). Knowledge hoarding is a small but significant area of investigation, referring to the accumulation of power to dominate over other professions. Knowledge is colonized by neglecting and subordinating a plethora of global contributions, rarely reflected upon in part because it is often invisible to White Western researchers (Marchais et al., 2020). Yang (GES 3) stressed the value of knowledge sharing as a two-way bridge: “There’s a lot of, to an extreme, kind of a worship of what’s from the West. And I’m troubled by that, and saddened by that. . . . The bridging work I’m trying to do is to bring people from the West who with humility are *gifting*, rather than *instructing* their expert knowledge.”

The value of existential psychology can only be felt by those who have access to it, resonate with it, and feel represented by it. “I could intuit some of their moves but the spirit of it just wasn’t me, even though I could commiserate intellectually,” reflected Haile (GES 1) about key mainstream philosophers. Among other speakers at the summits, McKenzie (GES 3) and Haile III (GES 1) highlighted the resistance they experienced from senior lecturers in the field when citing sources outside the mainstream literature, raising the question of why there is an unspoken expectation for existential scholarship to be validated via the traditional Eurocentric Elite, despite the vast quantity of global contributions and the potential irrelevance of traditional existentialists of privileged White Western males.

Many of the words, references, and names of people articulated by existential psychology do not exist in the worlds of those it studies. A movement toward the humanization of knowledge is thus required, emancipating ideas from the prison of epistemology, removing methodological and linguistic barriers that ostracize and colonize human minds, and instead facilitate access to new insights through creative and representative transdisciplinary pursuits. Humanizing knowledge includes making existential philosophies accessible and personal so that they can genuinely support and guide the people whom it sets out to guide and support. This is a question of professional humanity and ethics. Worth (2017) warned of the human tendency to act on autopilot rather than as a mark of one’s own values.

The dedicated efforts of several speakers at the summits provided tangible evidence of stepping beyond the norms to make accessibility possible, including through the arts, publishing popular public blogs, and forming communities of dialogue.

Decolonizing Existential Education

While “existentialism” is considered a fundamentally European historical phenomenon, the GESs reminded us that it is fundamental to discern between “existentialism” and “existential philosophies.” Existential philosophies or “philosophies of existence” refer to philosophical questioning premised upon existential concerns (Gordon, 2013). Notably identifiable are the culturally specific responses to existential themes that philosophers offer: isolation, meaning, freedom, and death (American; Yalom, 1980); freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation (Afro-Caribbean; Gordon, 2013); ethical vacuity, forlornness, the crisis of insufficiency, the conundrum of choice, and the enigma of authentic being (Latin American; Murillo, 2023); *wu wei*, authenticity, focusing, surrender, trusting the process/the Tao, getting back to the basics, steadiness and the midst of chaos, listening for the unheard, being fully present, humility and awe, bearing witness, following the flow, letting go, stillness and going nowhere (Asian; Yang, 2020); time, identity, essence, stability and change, creation, knowledge and seeing, and the nature of being and world (Mesoamerican; McLeod, 2023).

Contributions have been offered by every culture during every era of humanity (Robles, 2015) yet remain largely marginalized within the dominant Euro-American canon. By not teaching the full story, the full truth remains suppressed, thus oppressing human realities. Vété-Congolo (GES 3) highlighted the dehumanizing reality of this experience, noting that “de-existentialisation is not taught . . . that’s left outside of the curriculum.” Inadvertently showcased by the summits was the invisible harm resulting from privileged elitism and oppression occurring within the field. McKenzie (2023) has highlighted that it’s not just about *what* is being taught, but *who* is doing the teaching.

Confronting ignorance within privileged cultures, McKenzie unveiled that even seemingly innocent training exercises, such as introducing oneself, have a darker, silenced meaning for those who carry their slave name.

The summits have emphasized the lived reality of education being disproportionately harder for Black students. One example by Haile (GES 1) emphasized the recurring experience of Black students' theses being systematically rejected, and the challenges of fighting for credibility and acceptance within academia by publishing rejected theses as books (Haile, 2012), an experience shared by Charles Johnson, who independently published *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970* (2013), and Frantz Fanon, whose rejected doctoral thesis was later published as *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* ("Black Skin, White Masks"; 1952). The GESs have revealed that little has changed over the decades, and while academia claims to be more "inclusive," educational spaces are experienced radically differently by people of different races and backgrounds. "One group seeks justification while the other is self-justified," reflected Gordon (GES 1), whose story reflects many whose experiences in academia were interwoven with an inherent awareness that their contributions may be rejected due to their race and nonconformist focus.

The key existential theme of freedom is fundamentally different when discussed from a place of one's existence being self-justified in contrast to one's existence fighting for validation and liberation. While there is a dominant culture choosing whom and whom not to include, there is no global freedom.

Existential Perspectives on Knowledge Trafficking: History, Language, and Translation

Existentialism is often recognized as emerging postwar, yet it also developed following the Atlantic slave trade and imperial movements. Colonists not only steal, traffic, and trade people . . . they steal, traffic, and trade people's skills and wisdoms. Existential history blatantly traces the timeline of influence among the Existential Elite, building on and opposing each other's contributions, yet this

history exiles wider global influences. As experts in the GESs explicated, it is no coincidence that scholars are discovering compatibility between Eastern and European philosophies (Kalmanson, 2020). Heidegger (as one example) directly collaborated with Asian scholars and texts, reappropriating many concepts yet rarely citing sources and impeded by his limited multilingualism (Nelson, 2023).

English marketed as the *lingua franca* is often taken for granted by native speakers yet notably was not originally the *lingua franca* of existentialism—all classic thinkers being non-native English speakers. Rarely acknowledged is that the vast majority of existential psychology is taught and conducted by academics who have only studied translated texts. Multilingual speakers at the GESs iterated the limitations and vast potential for mistranslation of meaning, unveiling that (for example) a key concept of Sartre's "freedom" contributions are based on a misreading of Dostoyevsky *Notes from the Underground*, critiqued within Russian academia (e.g., Lesevitskii, 2016) yet a matter of obliviousness to most existential scholars.

Ubuntu: Toward an Ethical Transdisciplinary Existential Movement

An existentially grounded social psychology is uniquely equipped to investigate, illuminate, and disseminate the profound contemporary existential challenges raised in this chapter. For this, we argue for transdisciplinary collaboration. The humanistic African philosophy *Ubuntu*, meaning "humanity," "I am because you are," offers a powerful guide toward this, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all individuals within their societal and physical surroundings; supporting collectivism over individualism; promoting peace, unity, and solidarity; and recognizing community as one of the building blocks of society. Humanity is intrinsically bound together and individuals' choices in each moment have great impact, whether they collaborate or isolate, share or hoard, listen or silence. "Who you are as a person, what you live and bring, will affect everything that you do," wrote Worth (2017, p. 3), reminding us that the first intervention is the self.

Getting out of our own disciplinary silos is fundamental, for without a transdisciplinary epistemological awakening, the field risks overreliance and fetishization of its methods leading toward a path of solitude and disciplinary decadence (Gordon, 2023). We call on academics who have access to existential philosophies to connect with creative professionals such as artists, musicians, poets, and directors to share existential insights widely. Connection, music, film, literature, and the beauty of art and nature: These are the truly existential remedies. Thus, tangible creative examples of how scientific and philosophical ideas can become part of common knowledge and subsequently be used to negotiate one's way through difficult life challenges are presented.

Art Transcends Words

Art activities have been evidenced to develop personal, social, cultural, aesthetic, and moral values (Ibrahim, 1999), providing a universal language that transcends words and annihilates language barriers, as evidenced by all speakers at the GESs. Ceylan (GES 3) proved the timelessness of poetry, sharing how verses passed down between generations within the illiterate Turkish (outcast) community he was raised in preserved their culture's wisdom. Evangelista (GES 4) described how ancient Filipino traditional tattooing practices preserve Indigenous culture. Speakers used theater, movement, and documentaries to impart messages of liberation and pay homage to victims and survivors of genocide. Many described the grounding value of nature and creative arts, articulating how cinematics and music have the capacity to express what words cannot. Others promoted comedy and meditation as resources for self-inquiry and unlearning colonized messages. Finally, Soren (GES 3) united philosophies of eudaimonia and yoga practice as a journey toward eudaimonic well-being.

WHAT COMES OF A TANGLED INTEGRATION OF PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE, AND PRACTICE?

In this section we highlight insights that follow from bringing the above three topics together. A first observation is to recognize

Western and privileged biases evident in existential philosophy and science. A second observation underscores tensions, sometimes constructive, between philosophy and science, as well as the need to move beyond a primary focus on the individual. A third observation spotlights contemporary societal problems, particularly widening inequalities and related concerns about greed. These realities call for a return to virtue, ethics, and morality—longstanding themes in existential philosophy.

Addressing Biases in Existential Philosophy and Science: A Need to Decolonize

Humans naturally develop biases to navigate and survive the extraordinary complexities of their uncertain worlds. Yet in existentially inspired endeavors, practitioners and researchers must actively develop reflexive awareness of their biases as a means of discerning between subjectivity and emergent meanings and truths (Fraser, 2023). That same reflexivity is necessary for existential psychology, whose work is sometimes shrouded in colonizing, racist, individualistic, patriarchal, and privileged biases.

Nietzsche reckoned that "God is dead," yet he did not predict that existential philosophers would themselves replace the deity for many devoted followers. The Existential Elite became compounded as the core source of existential wisdom, with their taglines and key concepts sensationalized for their ability to speak to the masses. Yet these "masses" were not universally representative but, rather, constituted the collective consciousness of a comparatively privileged few. Interwoven within these ideas and concepts are contextually and subjectively situated biases, ethics, and values that have seeped through generations of existential psychology. Only by addressing and challenging the sexism, racism, and oppressive biases inherent in the canon can the field evolve into the humane, representative, and ethical source of wisdom that is so desperately needed in today's world.

Constructive Tensions and Moving beyond the Individual

Existential thinking emerged at a time of emergent secularism that embraced positiv-

ism and science as the way forward. Such perspectives regarded humans as little more than machines responding to external stimuli in predictable ways, hence the vision of social engineers seeking to rationally design and automate society in accordance with scientific and mathematical laws. This view was strongly challenged by the renegade philosophers, theorists, and literary figures who created the existential movement. They pushed back on scientism, pointing out its incapacity to engage with the deepest and most unsettling problems of the human condition.

Few, if any, contemporary scientists have embraced positivism—indeed, that distant perspective is largely dead, a relic of the past. Similarly, few embrace Skinner's (1971) behaviorist conception of psychology, which framed human experience exclusively in terms of observable behaviors and external inputs—there was no inner being in his stimulus–response reductionism. In contrast, current efforts to bring existential ideas to psychological science show rich varieties of inner experience.

Nonetheless, existential psychology inherited from classical existentialism a narrow focus on the freedom and self-realization of *the individual*. Sartre (1945/2001) went so far as to conflate existentialism with subjectivism, where “subjectivity must be the starting point” (p. 292). This individualistic view failed to acknowledge the fact that existence is not an isolated, solitary affair; it is fundamentally intersubjective and relational. The reality that individuals exist in relation to others invariably places moral demands on them. By focusing on themes of individual freedom, finitude, and self-realization, what often goes missing in existential psychology is an account of moral responsibility to others as central to a virtuous and praiseworthy life. To this end, the call to be authentic, to heroically confront one's own freedom and death, seems privileged and selfish when one sees that the majority of humanity struggles for the basic material goods to avoid *actual death*. Existential psychology needs to be mindful of this lacuna and come to grips with the fact that human existence is bound up with social, political, and ethical implications.

Widening Inequalities and Greed: Return to Virtue and Ethics

We noted that scientific research has described disturbing realities—increased deaths of despair (due to addictions, alcoholism, suicide), growing homelessness and poverty—all exacerbated by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. In the background of these problems is the destructive force of greed, which has longstanding presence in human history. The ancient Greeks saw greed and injustice as violating virtues of fairness, generosity, and equality and thereby contributing to civic strife (Balot, 2001). They called for public criticism and censuring of greed and anticipated later admonishments by Jesus Christ, who told his followers, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). In the 14th century, Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1308/2006) famously placed sins of greed and gluttony, along with fraud and dishonesty, in his nine circles of hell. In the 18th century, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776/1981) made the case for self-interest and capitalism, but at the same time, recognized the problem of greed, framed as limitless appetites of the vain and insatiable. And in the 19th century, Dostoevsky warned readers of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880/1990) of the “terrible individualism” that was emerging in the modern age, creating a state of self-destructive egoism and greed, where “man only trembles for fear that he should lose his money and the privileges he has won for himself” (p. 276).

Viewing greed as an enduring vice in human history, we underscore that eudaimonic well-being focuses not only on traditional ends of freedom, autonomy, and self-realization, but also prioritizes a life of virtue. Excellence, as originally conceived by Aristotle, regarded the virtuous life as synonymous with human flourishing, but it is not the usual virtues of courage, temperance, or even truthfulness that matter today, but generosity—freely and willingly giving to and caring for others. Nietzsche, in his typical prescience, pointed this out in his later writings, recognizing that the character trait of generosity was becoming increasingly rare as European culture was

in the throes of degeneration and sickness, careening toward hedonism, crass materialism, and the mechanized exploitation of the human being.

Although Nietzsche was a starkly anti-democratic thinker who praised exceptional individuals or “higher types” who were preternaturally equipped with traits of courage, creativity, and power, he was acutely aware that the higher types have a moral obligation to treat the less fortunate with tenderness, generosity, and mercy. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883/1966), Nietzsche referred to generosity and compassionate gift-giving as “the highest virtue” (p. 74). Later, in *The Anti-Christ* (1888/1990), he described the duty for the privileged, writing, “When the exceptional human being treats the mediocre more tenderly than himself and his peers, this is not mere politeness of the heart—it is simply his duty” (p. 57). Referring to the masses as “mediocre” is unfortunate and typical of Nietzsche elitism, but the message is clear. Nietzsche recognized that it is those in power who have the highest obligation to be generous.

We argue this kind of virtue is crucial to eudaimonic well-being because it reminds us that we are not isolated individuals but communal beings who share the same home. As Zarathustra said to his disciples, “Let your gift-giving love . . . serve the meaning of the earth . . . that it may give the earth a meaning, *a human meaning* (1883/1966, p. 76, emphasis added). Embodying generosity in this way not only creates a more equitable and just society, it addresses the myriad toxicities of late-stage capitalism. To be generous is to be receptive to the expression of existential ideas beyond the rarified halls of the academy and White, Eurocentric dominance. It is to recognize the Zulu principle of *Ubuntu*, that across cultures and histories, we humans are all bound together in the shared project of “humanity.”

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