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An Authentic Human Being with a 17th C. Flair: Fenelon Spiritual Letters and Existentialism

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*An Authentic Human Being
with a 17th C. Flair*

Fenelon Spiritual Letters and Existentialism

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If we allow the world to hinder

us,

then our professed freedom is
only a word.

Letter 30

Francois de Fenelon

1651-1715

*An Authentic Human Being with a 17th C. Flair
Fenelon Spiritual Letters and Existentialism*

Abstract

This is an invitation for the mind and the heart to cross the threshold into another dimension in time and explore the parallels between Existential Psychotherapy concepts and Fenelon's Christian Spiritual Letters written 300 years ago. Christianity and Existentialism are "individualistic" approaches focused on self-awareness, self-responsibility, and ownership to facilitate personal change; both ask for commitment, and none of them offer easy ways or painless quests. Christian spiritual letters as a personal growth tool are centred on Jesus, a self-actualizer, who fits every characteristic described by Maslow.

Introduction

Francois de **Fenelon** (1651-1715)

Francois de **Fenelon** was born in Chateau de Fenelon in Sainte Mondane, Perigord in 1651 into an aristocratic French family. Educated by Jesuits he himself became an educator at the highest level as tutor to the only grandson of Louis XIV, The Sun King. Fenelon was a Catholic prelate, a writer and liberal theologian whose theories and publications, despite the opposition of Church and State, eventually became the basis for profound political and cultural changes in France (Clarke, 1977). During his office as Archbishop of Cambrai, he became the spiritual counselor and director of various men and women, members of the corrupted court of Louis XIV, who sought to develop true spirituality and inner growth under his direction (Whitaker, 1973). As modern Psychotherapy does today, in a respectful and empathic manner, Fenelon responded to these troubled men and women with spiritual letters where he shared his own experiences, encouraged, confronted, or asked them for insight to find within the solution to their personal challenges.

Writing spiritual letters is a Christian tradition emerging from the 1st century A.D., New Testament writers like Paul, Peter, or John testify to this practice as a means of providing counsel and spiritual guidance. Some famous Catholic spiritual directors are

St Catherine of Sienna, St Ignatius of Loyola, St Teresa, and St John of the Cross; and on the Protestant side we find Martin Luther, Calvin, and John Knox (Blanton, 2006). In the 21st century Narrative Therapy has incorporated secular letter writing into clinical practice with the purpose of creating and maintaining change as well as developing and emphasizing the therapeutic relationship (Blanton, 2006).

Christianity like Existential psychotherapy have been considered “individualistic” approaches since they both focus on personal insight and inner change to facilitate growth, both ask for compromise, and none of them offer an easy way nor a painless quest.

Viktor Frankl (1959) as a prisoner of a concentration camp in WWII came to the conclusion that when we can no longer change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves, this was his approach to life within one of the most desperate situations, however he survived and based on his war and camp experiences he founded Logotherapy. Three hundred years before, Fenelon found that while personal change can only come from a courageous free will decision, we also need the help of God to achieve change, and so he wrote: “We must be made to feel our weakness, our wretchedness, our inability to correct ourselves. We need to understand what kind of people we really are while waiting for God to change us (Letter 20)”. So change is not easy to achieve when it is only based on human will power, as Holmes (2005) states our

inside “self is merely a conglomeration of all our biases and the implication that we can never be rid of them (Holmes, 2005, p 110)”.

So, if we cannot get rid of our biases, because they are part of what we truly are, is there a way to develop our potential with what we already have? Could a combination of self-awareness and positive role modelling set us on the way to self-actualization?

The self-actualization concept comes from various thinkers including Carl G. Jung, Otto Rank, and Alfred Adler departing from Freud’s classical psychoanalytic formulations emphasizing the importance of individuality. Jung has been credited with being the first to use the term self-actualization. In Existential Psychology, self-actualization is the process of growth and fulfilment of potentialities (Whitson, 1996). Abraham Maslow, from a secular perspective, describes a self-actualizer, compared to the average person, as one who has a perception of life less distorted by personal wishes or neurotic needs, a characteristic that enables the individual to be more tolerant and accepting of self, others, and nature. Also, they are spontaneous in thinking and behaviour, focusing their attention on problems outside themselves rather than within (self-centred) (Whitson, 1996). From a Christian point of view, Jesus Christ set, through example, the way as He demonstrated in deeds what Maslow describes as the characteristics of a self-actualizer: an innate directional positive force, high levels of empathy, full sympathy, social interest, identification with the oppressed and compassionate care for humankind

and nature (Maslow, 1987). Consequently, it can be argued that Christian spiritual letters propose and guide personal growth based on a self-actualized role model.

This explorative research aimed to satisfy curiosity. The questions focused on how, what, when and where could Existential psychology illuminate Fenelon's writings. , and thus followed a rather informal structure. The 40 letters analysed here came from the book "Let Go" published in 1973 by Whitaker House. In his introduction, Robert E. Whitaker writes "Self is the only prison that can bind the soul. Every Christian who is really serious about living the Christ-like life craves freedom from bondage (Whitaker, 1973). The Existential approach, in parallel, proposes our existence as not fixed but in constant transition and continually searching for freedom (Corey, 2001). Christian principles, as Existential psychology, promote freedom and aspire to accompany the person in a journey that is, by necessity, frightening and painful. In this regard, Frankl (1975) states: "for something to give light, it must first endure burning". While Fenelon writes: "Self forced into the light, sees itself as it really is, in all its deformity and despair and disgrace" (Letter 10).

M e t h o d

This research was designed as a combination of methodologies: Hermeneutics, Thematic Analysis and Constant Comparison Analysis.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics was selected as a tool of analysis and understanding of Fenelon's spiritual letters under the lens of present day Existential psychotherapy tenets. This comparison was based on Gadamer's (1975) argument emphasizing that past and present are strongly connected to each other since past the supportive ground from which present stems. While Lyall (2001) tells us that spoken language takes place within a world that is already shared, while written narratives open the door to worlds which are new to us, and nevertheless can be reinterpreted by each reader as they find meanings maybe not understood by others or not even intended by the author.

Thematic Analysis (TA) and Constant Comparison Analysis

TA was used to define the most prevalent ideas in FSL after systematic and multiple readings of the letters one by one, every day in random order, and then altogether one after the other. To finally code and categorize the themes. This was followed by constant comparison analyses between the letters and Existentialist authors (Yalom, Van-Deurzen, Holmes, Frankl, Maslow, Corey, Perls, Rogers). Reading times were followed by reflection and personal introspection looking for in-depth analysis to 'understand' the data.

Participants - Materials

Francois de Fenelon and his Spiritual Letters (FSL)

Forty Spiritual Letters written by Francois de Fenelon during the first half of the 17th century, and addressed to men and women living in Louis XIV's court who submitted to Fenelon's spiritual direction in search of inner development.

Fenelon

Fenelon was spiritually enriched and deeply influenced by Madame Guyon, who, by the time they met, was already considered as of dubious reputation because of her links with Quietism and his founder Miguel de Molinos (1640-1697). Quietism is a type of mysticism based on the belief that perfection lies in the utter passivity of the soul before God, allowing it to be absorbed by the divine spirit. Such passivity requires annihilation of the will, and all actions –whether good or bad -- are hindrances (Livingstone, 1996). The salient points of Mme Guyon's doctrine are: First, spiritual life is a process of 'disappropriation', a growing detachment that allows God to gradually take possession of the soul. Second, spiritual life is a teleological process involving design, purpose, and meaning, thus the spirit will move from lower to higher stages (Dupre & Saliers, 1989). Mme. Guyon summarized this in two words "humble abandon". Her spirituality and state of mind is described by Delacroix (quoted by Dupre and Saliers, 1989, pp 137-138) as follows:

Through patient interior work and through the fundamental richness of her creative unconscious Mme. Guyon replaces discursive thinking by an inexpressible intuition which filled almost her entire mind. And since we must act to remain in accordance with God, she substitutes to voluntary and personal

action an involuntary an impersonal one – which she calls passivity and which appears to her as a creative infinity. Yet this passivity expresses itself not in confused and uncoordinated movements. It is coherent and intelligent, it displays unity and finality.

Beautifully written 300 years ago and highly influenced by Mme Guyon's spirituality Fenelon's letters appear to be consistent with existential psychotherapy, in the way they direct, counsel and encourage inner encounter to find solutions and invite change. These letters reveal Fenelon's spiritual wisdom and deep-rooted conviction that only through total abandonment to God real peace of mind and change may be attained (Whitaker, 1973). Abandonment entails immediate, direct, and intuitive knowledge of God, the authenticity this experience, Fenelon tells us, brings along vitality, productivity, serenity, and joy which stem from a simultaneous inner and outward harmonization in union with the Divine. Once this state is reached the outward world becomes superfluous and sin impossible because this "loving knowledge and intimate union with God" is the point where consciousness is transformed and reconfigured (Price, 1992).

Existential Psychotherapy

To facilitate inner growth and personal development Existentialist psychotherapy works with six basic concepts (Corey, 2001; Yalom 1989 & 1998, Frankl 1978):

1. Self-Awareness
2. Freedom and Responsibility
3. Existential Isolation
4. Search for Meaning
5. Existential Anxiety
6. Death Awareness

A constant comparison analysis found that Fenelon spiritual direction matches all of the above listed concepts. Following, each of them will be explained and paralleled with similar ideas identified in his letters. Fenelon's letters excerpt will appear first, followed by its Existential parallel. Looking to respect and be as close as possible to the intention of each Existential therapy author's writings their text have been copied verbatim and referenced accordingly, while paraphrasing has been kept to a minimum to avoid my own biases and hoping to keep the mirroring game as clear as possible.

We will begin with Self Awareness ...

1. Self Awareness

Existential Psychotherapy's first goal is to help clients gain awareness of what and how they are, experience and do. This self-awareness is expected to promote change. A transformation based on difficult and painful work that demands insight, reflection, self-acceptance, knowledge of the environment, responsibility for choices, and the ability to make contact with self and others (Yalom 1989). As self-awareness expands so does freedom and the opportunities to develop potential, to take responsibility, and to own the consequences upon self, others, and the environment. For Fenelon self-awareness is gained through the "death of self", this is a process of self-knowledge which allows the individual to recognize and destroy egocentric/neurotic needs as well as ego-defenses (introjection, projection, confluence, etc.). This self-awareness is gained

through self-examination, reflection, insight, and most importantly by “a humble surrender” of the will (ego-necessities and/or neurotic needs). It requires patience, courage, faith, humility, understanding and honest acceptance of ourselves and our human limitations. Deeply different from Existentialism, Christian tradition puts especial trust in a third agent, God.

Fenelon - Letter 20

So do not be surprised at again finding yourself becoming sensitive, impatient, haughty, and self-willed. You must be made to understand that this is your natural disposition, and without God's grace, you will never be anything different.

Through his letters Fenelon emphasizes once and again how recognizing and defeating self, through and with the agency (grace) of God, brings ownership, responsibility, and freedom as the person becomes a new creation.

Parallel – Holmes (2005, p. 14)

“(it) ... endorse the idea that human beings never relinquish, or totally resolve, their childhood issues, and therefore, as adults, will continue to be neurotic to some degree or other.”

Holmes, explains how our psychological has indelible marks (neurotic needs) which can hardly be defeated, thus change is in the end a very arduous battle, which cannot be won unless change is achieved at a very deep level, and when it is reached by a superficial cognitive “learning” in a moment of stress the person will most likely reaction will automatically emerge as an unconscious response, out of the individual's control.

2. Freedom and Responsibility

Existential therapists propose that by taking responsibility, living in the “here and now”, and accepting who and how the person really is, the individual self-generates a freedom that brings along the drive and creative potential to self-actualize (Gelso 2004). This Existential understanding is similar to Fenelon’s concept of spiritual growth characterized by an enhanced vitality, productivity, serenity, joy, and inner freedom as a result of the death of the self. This death refers to the self-denial of neurotic needs.

Another similarity with Existential thinking is the idea that Yalom (1998) borrows from Heidegger to explain what Fenelon and Christian tradition define as “the world”. Yalom tells us that Heidegger found two fundamental ways of being, the first is a state of “forgetfulness”, the second a state of “mindfulness”. Forgetfulness is living in the world of things, immersed in the everyday distractions, where “the person is “leveled down” absorbed in “idle chatter”, lost in the “they”, his/her freedom surrendered to the everyday world (Yalom, 1998, p 186). In this line of thought, Fenelon, 300 years ago, writes: *If we allow the world to hinder us, then our professed freedom is only a word* (Let. 30).

Yalom (1998) explains “mindfulness” as a state where the individual is able to feel awe and to marvel at the existence of things, to be in a harmonious relationship with self, others, and nature; owning and being responsible for his/her actions, feelings and consequences. In Christian tradition and for Fenelon this idea describes a close relationship with God. Price (1992) writes that when this state is reached the outward world becomes superfluous and sin is impossible, and that it is precisely within this

“intimate union with God” and “loving knowledge of the divine” where consciousness is transformed and reconfigured (Price, 1992). Freedom gained through ownership and responsibility is for Fenelon “renouncing to the world” and dying to self (ego necessities, neurotic needs). Renouncing to what the world has imposed on us “compulsory shopping”, “sex as a parody of love”, “materialistic unending needs”, “recreational drugs”, “alcohol abuse”, etc., might become a cheap price to pay if we consider that by leaving them behind the individual increases own personal freedom.

Fenelon writes:

Fenelon - Letter 29

*He might seem to be free. (...) But, nevertheless, he is a prisoner.
(...) the freedom that I will covet for you to enjoy is far more
valuable than all you are fearful of losing.*

While we find the following parallel in existential psychotherapy, as Corey (2001, p. 146) describes:

Clients learn that in many ways they are keeping themselves prisoner by some of their past decisions, and they realize that they can make new decisions. They see how they are trading the security of dependence for the anxieties that accompany choosing for themselves.”

Fenelon insistence on defending our freedom is clear in his

Letter 30

*If we allow the world to hinder us, then our professed freedom is only
a word.*

Supported by Yalom’s (1989) understanding of a free existence:

A free existence implies engagement and commitment in a never-ending line of alternatives that make us “condemned to freedom” and constantly confronted by new choices as we stop being creations of others to become owners of ourselves.

3. Existential Isolation and Relationship with Others

Although our human nature compels us to live in relationship with others at the same time freedom and responsibility bring independence and an increased awareness of our loneliness, meaninglessness, emptiness and existential isolation. The individual responsibility to create and own him/herself digs an abyss between self and others, and a sense of isolation that not even in the company of the most loved and intimate ones can be filled up (Yalom, 1989; Graham, 1986). In Fenelon's thought this gap and this loneliness are requisites to spiritual growth, and so he writes.

Letter 4

You must be willing to yield to the will of God whenever He decides to remove from you all of the props on which you have leaned. Sometimes you must give up even your most spiritual friends.

Making reference to this natural human isolation and the anxiety it creates, Holmes (2005, P. 104) states:

Parallel (Holmes, 2005, p 104)

Human beings find existential isolation (mine) too distressing to endure, and they are prone to deny it by immersing themselves in the illusory belief that intimate relationships can protect them from this isolation that is firmly anchored to human existence.

Whether from an Existential or a Fenelonist point of view the challenges and anxieties demanded by self-actualization can be a daunting lifelong journey. Christian theologian Paul Tillich (1952) considers that it takes courage to learn how to live from within and taking the dare to let go our need to control for the dare to be in faith and trust. Living

from the inside, Tillich writes, implies forgetting “the world” in order to achieve a higher level of interior freedom and become more mindful and authentic.

Faith and God are Christian concepts upon which Fenelon bases inner freedom. In Existential understanding faith could be considered as the “freedom to dare”. To find or create our personal identity is a journey full of challenges and risks, it demands patience and courage and complete understanding that no one can make our life choices for us, no one can change us, and neither can we change anyone (Besserman, 1994). Frankl (1959) in a display of courage, surrender, and trust, after his experiences as a concentration camp prisoner, proposes that when an external situation cannot be changed then we are challenged to change ourselves. This attitude towards fate was his number one tool to rise above the fear, the isolation, and the aberrations of human cruelty. His weakness made him strong. The annulment of his ego-necessities became the source of his compassion, good faith, and love as he expressed in an interview: “no matter how much we have been hurt, nothing gives us the right to hurt others (Frankl, 1968).” This is the ultimate example of self-responsibility, self-ownership, and freedom.

Relationships with Others

A given of Existentialism is responsibility towards self and others. Buber believes that love is an *I* taking responsibility for a *you* and that people become authentic when they decide to take a stand for love in relation to others (Vermes, 1988). As a paradox of existence, and although we are alone in essence, we are, at the same time, gregarious

beings, seeking for belonging, closeness, and connectedness with others, close to Buber's thought Fenelon suggests how to relate to others in his

Letter 24,

It seems to me that you need to be a little more big-hearted about the imperfection of other people. (...) But it will be enough if you are willing to be patient with imperfections, whether they be serious or not so serious. Do not allow yourself to turn away from people because of their imperfections.

Corey makes, in a stronger tone, almost the same suggestion as Fenelon:

Parallel – Corey (2001, p.149)

If we are unable to tolerate ourselves when we are alone, how can we expect anyone else to be enriched by our company? Before we can have any solid relationship with another, we must have a relationship with ourselves. We must learn to listen to ourselves. We have to be able to stand alone before we can truly stand beside another.

4. Search for Meaning

Opposed to classical psychoanalysis, Existential therapists like Frankl, do not hold a deterministic view in regards to the person being restricted by past events, irrational drives or unconscious forces, but they understand challenging situations and suffering as an opportunity in the here and now to find meaning and purpose in life (Aanstoos, 1996). As a prisoner in Auschwitz and Dachau concentration camps, Viktor E. Frankl observed and experienced suffering and challenges, and through them he realized that salvation (survival and growth) can be achieved by what he considers the highest goal a human being can aspire: inner freedom (Frankl, 1959). Frankl's personal suffering was never an obstacle to growth but a number of opportunities to find meaning and purpose to nurture his resilience and will to freedom, in spite of finding himself immersed in the

worst of circumstances. His conception of suffering is very similar to what Soelle expresses: "The willingness to suffer is the utmost expression of human freedom (1992, p. 466)". This is a constant invitation that Fenelon makes to accept suffering (the cross) as a purposeful and meaningful to vanquish our ego necessities and grow stronger from our weaknesses.

However, Fenelon also understands suffering from a different point, as a consequence of selfish ego-needs, and his Letters 10 and 11 he states that when suffering arises from a egocentric needs (neurotic) then, no matter how much pain the person goes through, self-awareness or change are not attained. This is consistent with the idea of neuroticism, in regard to the inability that the neurotic has to let go, to take a leap of faith, and lose the secondary gains, eg self-victimization (Rudin, 1968).

Fenelon - Letter 7

Evil circumstances are changed into good when they are received with an enduring trust in the love of God, while good circumstances may be changed into evil when we become attached to them through the love of self.

Parallel - Frankl, 1978

Creating new meaning, Logotherapy is designed to help clients find a meaning in life. The therapist's function is not to tell clients what their particular meaning in life should be but to point out that they can discover meaning even in suffering

5. Existential Anxiety

Existential angst is inherent to being human and stems from the individual's fight for survival. Existential therapists differentiate between normal and neurotic anxiety, and

they see the former as a potential source of growth (Yalom, 1989). Fenelon equates existential anxiety to faith and trust in God as he writes in his:

Fenelon - Letter 20

... pure faith (...) holds the soul in a state of continued suspense (...) constantly up in the air, never quite certain of what is going to happen in the future; never quite able to touch a foot to solid ground. (...) This moment by moment dependence, this dark, unseeing peacefulness of the soul under the utter uncertainty of the future, is a true martyrdom which takes place silently and without any stir. It is God's way of bringing a slow death to self.

Existentialism, in general, excludes the Divine from the picture, while Fenelon knows that change can only be achieved by willingly accepting the death of the self (neurotic needs) in a complete surrender of the will to God.

In contrast, for existentialists like Sartre or Camus, Graham (1968) tells us, "*death is something against which man can rebel, investing life with personal meaning and purpose and becoming committed to it (Graham, 1986, p. 204)*". So, in the existentialist approach the whole responsibility of change is placed upon the individual human being. The question is if the human being is left to change himself on his own, without nothing within, would not this lead to neurosis, being that human nature is so prone to failure? And then again why combat or try to defeat death when death is the most inevitable part of life? However, humans as we are rebellion is part of us, Fenelon seems to understand our tricky humanness:

Fenelon - Letter 10

... God has reduced you to a state of weakness. Your ego can neither be convinced nor forced into submission by any other means; it is always finding secret lines of supply from your own courage' it is always discovering impenetrable retreats in your own cleverness.

Rudin, puts a label to this old human characteristic seeing rebellion as a neurotic need:

Parallel Rudin (1968, p. 203)

The neurotic seeks a way out of a psychic dead-end street. In his very depths he believes in an answer to his seemingly insoluble problem, and he tries desperately to find a way of freedom.

Rebellion might well be a byproduct of a natural fear to suffer and our all so human need to control, predict, and run the show:

Fenelon - Letter 2

But usually we want to drive a bargain with God. We would at least like to suggest some limits so that we can see an end to our suffering. (...) Because the stubborn clinging to life which makes the cross necessary in the first place, also tends us to reject that cross – at least in part. So we have to go over the same ground again and again. (...) We end up suffering greatly, but to very little purpose.

Rudin, again, brings, in this regard, neurosis to the fore:

Parallel - Rudin (1968, p. 204)

Neurosis by itself fails to give a satisfactory answer to the problem of the neurotic individual. (...) On the contrary drives him into a circulus vitiosus of instinct denial and ersatz satisfactions which shrinks more and more into a narrow, stifling prison .

6. Death Awareness

For the Existential therapist awareness of death or a brush with it may be the opportunity a person needs to change or enhance his/her life. Yalom (1998) states that self-awareness brings the ability to grasp the reality of the future and therefore how inescapable death can be. Corey presents us with the following paradox: *Our awareness*

of death is the source of zest for life and creativity (2001, p 163)''. Paradox is an event that we constantly find in Existentialism, and we also do in Fenelon, especially in his treatment of life and death. Both Fenelon letters and Existential therapy focus on supporting clients as they discover who they are and what are the things they value. Both, as well, encourage clients to develop a healthy awareness of death in order to value life and live it to its fullest.

For Fenelon death is at the core of his message, based in the Christian belief and wish of dying to self in order to be reborn and live in and through Christ. This is, to become new and free creations.

Fenelon - Letter 35

We Christians must bear our crosses. In my opinion, self is the greatest cross of them all! (...) If we surrender and die to self every day of our lives, there won't be much to do on the last day of our life. (...) You will find out in the end, that these little daily deaths will completely destroy the pain of our final dying!

Corey takes a close approach to Fenelon regarding the fear and anxieties of living and dying ...

Parallel - Corey (2001, p. 153)

Those who fear death also fear life. If we affirm life and live in the present as fully as possible, we will not be obsessed with the end of life.

Fenelon understands well the troubles of dying, and possibly could understand in this days the pressure of choosing euthanasia as fear of suffering deludes the intensity of faith and separates the person from what might be the last chance to reconsider his/her own relationship to other, and if necessary take the opportunity to ask for forgiveness from those whom he or she might have hurt purposely or not. Every stage of life, even when suffering is present, has a purpose and a meaning which can liberate the heart, the mind, the soul if confronted in its own time.

Fenelon - Letter 22

Nothing humbles us more effectively than trouble thoughts about death. And in the midst of such meditations, we often find ourselves wondering whatever happened to all the faith and assurance we thought we had. (...) This is the crucible of humiliation in which our faith is ground down and tested, in which we see again our own weaknesses and unworthiness.

Yalom (1998, p. 184) addresses the opportunities that death might bring to life, as he explains:

Parallel - Yalom (1998, p. 184)

The recognition of death plays a significant role in psychotherapy, for it can be the factor that helps us transform a stale mode of living into a more authentic one.

Existentialism had its origins in Christian principles, perhaps this is the reason why a French Archbishop writing 300 years ago can approach us with ideas which might seem familiar to existential understandings of inner change and personal development. Finding similarities or dissimilarities is an exercise of curiosity. Choosing which path to follow belongs entirely to the individual's free will.

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