Existential Maturity: Wong’s *Existential Psychology for the 21st Century*  
Susan James and Gary Foster

In his editorial, Paul Wong (2004) wishes to free existential psychology from the “long shadows” of “existentialist” philosophers of the 19th and 20th century (p. 1). He presents a picture of a more “compassionate, positive and practical existential psychology” (p. 1) which contrasts with the cold, abstract phenomenology of Heidegger or the selfish (even solipsistic) freedom of the early Sartre. Existential psychology needs to get beyond the particular cultural and historical milieu from which it emerged, a period of time in which the individual self became the focus and fascination of psychology, philosophy, literature and even, in some cases, religion. We applaud Wong’s expanded vision of existential psychology, one in which ethical, political and social considerations are inseparable from individual human existence.

Wong’s (2004) vision includes questions from the many interwoven domains that constitute human existence (described in James & Prilletensky, 2002; James, Harris & Clarke, 2003). From the individual domain Wong raises the issue of finding our true identity and fulfilling our most cherished dreams. On a socio-cultural level Wong asks what could be done to change the conditions that perpetuate injustice and how can we facilitate community development? From the realm of the religio-moral, Wong asks us to consider what it means to treat others with respect and how we are to understand the meaning of suffering, pain and death. One domain that was not included but is worth exploring is that of the family. Some questions that might emerge at this level are: “How do we treat other family members with respect?” “What is our family’s shared purpose and moral vision”, “What values does our family embrace?”

The expansiveness of Wong’s vision parallels the maturation that has taken place in the work of a number of philosophers who have emerged from the existential-phenomenological tradition. Much water has passed under the bridges of the Seine since Sartre, writing from the comfort of his Paris cafés, told us that “we are condemned to be free” (Sartre, 1966) and that “Hell is other people” (Garcián in *No Exit*; Sartre, 1955). Modern ‘continental’ philosophers have continued to emphasize *existence* as opposed to abstract or disengaged views of the human subject, but this subject is now one who finds her subjectivity through others (Levinas), recognizes his authentic self only by understanding something of the history and tradition of their *life-world* (Gadamer) or sees her self in terms of a story or narrative constructed dialogically (Ricoeur, Taylor).

Emmanuel Levinas, who studied under both Husserl and Heidegger, rejected the primacy of the latter’s ontology of the individual, prioritizing instead, the fundamental ethical relationship that one has to the *Other*. This Other, for Levinas represents, not only Other people, but also that relationship we have with God, or our debt to those who came before us and suffered from oppression, violence and injustice (Levinas, 1996). Ethics, a relationship with the Other, is more

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important than any attempt to limit the Other through our attempts at comprehending her.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, another student of Heidegger, understands human existence in terms of the cultural and historical traditions that shape our experience of the world (James, Foster, Amaral, 2003; James & Foster, 2003). What Gadamer calls a horizon, is that set of beliefs, assumptions, or the perspective that we bring to life enabling us to make some sense of the world, giving it meaning or coherence (Gadamer, 1999). Realizing our ‘authentic self’ requires that we become aware of these assumptions or prejudices that constitute our horizon and shape our particular experience of the world.

Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor have both contributed greatly to our understanding of the concept of selfhood. Taylor’s (1989) Sources of the Self gives us an historical view of the emergence of the modern subject or self and identifies the moral sources that give that self substance or help us find meaning and avoid despair. Ricoeur’s (1992) Oneself as Another, has shown us the dialectical nature of selfhood (James & Foster 2003). The self is a phenomenon which cannot be fully understood in descriptive terms, but also must be understood as an agent to whom we impute moral responsibility, freedom, and so on. Ricoeur’s notion of narrative identity brings together the descriptive and ethical dimensions of selfhood helping us to view the self in both objective and subjective terms (Ricoeur, 1992).

Wong (2004) has pointed the way to a more mature and fruitful conception of existential psychology. We believe (as Wong suggests) that this vision will only be strengthened by availing ourselves to positive developments in philosophy as well as in other disciplines.

References