The Question of Method for Existential Psychology:
A Response to Paul T. P. Wong

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I feel a deep sense of gratitude and much enthusiasm upon reading Dr. Wong’s (2004) editorial for this inaugural issue of IJEPP. I feel grateful to be a small part of the community that Paul has invited to celebrate this occasion, brimming as it is with scholars I respect and admire. More importantly, I feel inspired once again to take up the banner of existential psychology and all it has to offer to our profession. I know Paul’s words have affected many others in the same way, and that is why I have no doubt his message will be heard and that it will make a difference.

I fully agree with Dr. Wong’s editorial statement. The questions he raises are, indeed, central to any existential psychology worthy of the name. The questions of the meaning of existence, authenticity, life, finitude and facticity are the basis upon which any existential psychology must be built if it is to be in fact an existential psychology. Further, and also in agreement with Dr. Wong, an existential psychology must be an existential psychology, with an identity and mission that is distinct from the existential tradition of philosophy that inspired it. We must be careful not to fall into the trap that Heidegger himself warned us about: that existential psychology and the human sciences should not be the mere application of existential philosophy to psychology; rather, psychology must discover for itself a home in the neighborhood of Being alongside philosophy, wherein it must find its own manner of dwelling – its own approach to thinking. (See: Heidegger, 2001; Sipiora, 2000). Certainly, Dr. Wong’s statement speaks in just this spirit.

The question of existential psychology’s identity resides primarily in the question of psychology’s particular approach to psychological issues. In other words, the problem of the meaning of existential psychology is a problem of method. Ultimately, it is psychology’s manner of proceeding with the activity of psychology, and not merely its content, that distinguishes psychology from philosophy, poetry or any other discipline.

The importance of the question of method is highlighted by Dr. Wong when he writes that existential psychology “does not see any contradiction between the holistic study of the whole person and the quantitative research of certain psychological attributes” (p. 2). He states that existential inquiry values both “the subjective, phenomenological experiences of the person, as well as the objective, observable and measurable behaviours” (p. 2). This statement raises the question of how these two seemingly opposing standpoints can be reconciled through the medium of an existential psychology. Indeed, the very duality of subjectivity and objectivity is a problem that existentialism has consistently sought to call into question. If indeed existential psychology sees no contradiction between subjective and objective approaches to the human being, how might this seeming paradox be resolved precisely through the existential approach to the human being-in-the-world? My comments in response to this question are written in the spirit of deepening the theme that Dr. Wong has already laid before us.

I invite the reader, first, to imagine that science were to somehow achieve it’s ideal

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of a completely objective account of the world. To fully appreciate this thought experiment, however, we must clarify the meaning of objectivity. Defined in terms of the subject-object split systematized in Descartes’ philosophy (though announced earlier by Galileo’s distinction between primary and secondary qualities), a completely objective account of the world would be an account that is, by definition, devoid of any subjective qualities. In other words, it would be an account of the world that, in principle, would be entirely indifferent to human concerns. What this means, then, is that the ultimate triumph of science would be the systematic and rigorous revelation of a world devoid of any meaning. The telos of the positivist project of science – the point at which science envisions itself to be complete – would be the point at which what is most real is understood to be that which makes no difference to human affairs. In short, it would be the celebration of the most banal of nihilisms. To arrive, then, at the ultimate truth in terms of positivist science is, ironically, to arrive at a truth that does not matter and makes no difference. Who would care enough to show up for the party?

Of course, any genuine scientist would rightly object, and passionately so, to this account of the ends of science. It is indeed a dismal picture, but more importantly, it is a perversion of the reality of the aims of science as a human endeavor. In reality, scientists, and consumers of science, are passionately engaged and interested in the results of scientific labor. Indeed, we engage in scientific projects because we believe them to matter and make a difference to an intrinsically meaningful world. Ideally, we would strive then to engage our scientific project in such a way that it would enhance the well-being of the world and the humans who dwell in it. Indeed, science is a deeply meaningful project and a noble profession. It is strange, then, to say the least, that the epistemological position of positivist philosophy of science, which is the very basis of the contemporary scientific method of investigation, is so far removed from the lived reality of the meaning of science as a human activity.

This problem at the heart of science was identified by Max Weber (1978), who noted that modern science and technology had become dominated by the hegemony of formal rationality at the expense of substantive rationality. “Formal rationality refers primarily to the calculability of means and procedures, substantive rationality to the value (from some explicitly defined standpoint) of ends or results” (Burbraker, 1991, p. 36). In other words, modernity can, in part, be characterized by the subordination of ends – that is, values – to mere means. The means of calculation and procedure become ends in themselves rather than a means to an extrinsic ‘good’. When this happens, science ironically swallows its own tail, like a giant Uroboros, and loses its meaning and value.

Existentialism rejects the rigid distinction between formal and substantive rationality, a disingenuous distinction which itself is based upon the subject-object dichotomy. Our methods, whether we realize it explicitly or not, always imply the ends toward which they are aiming. Methods matter and make a difference. Our sciences are never really a matter of mere calculation and procedure, but when they are characterized as such, we are able to covertly avoid, to our detriment, the all-important question of meaning and value: Who does our work serve and for what purpose? For what good does it matter and make a difference? By raising these questions anew, existentialism calls us as scientists to take responsibility for our methods of investigation and account for where they lead us. It reminds us to re-
connect scientific endeavor to what matters in terms of our everyday lives.

If we are to do justice to the meaning of science as it is lived, then it is necessary to ground scientific investigation in the concreteness of our everyday lives within which science as a human endeavor has meaning and value. Certainly, a central thrust of existentialism since Kierkegaard and Nietzsche has been the fidelity to the concreteness of experience. For this reason, it is no surprise then that existentialism has most often been wedded to a phenomenological method. Indeed, the phenomenological method is founded upon a fidelity to the things themselves (Husserl, 1970/1990), a devotion to letting “that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 58), or, in other words, a commitment to the primacy to perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). In this sense, phenomenology means something different than the term as it is typically used in psychology, as a concern with the subject matter of subjectivity. It refers not to a subject matter (a what) but to a method of research (a how) (Heidegger, p. 50). As Merleau-Ponty (1994) wrote, "[the phenomenologist returns] to the world which precedes [scientific description], [the world] of which science always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific characterization is an abstract and derivative sign language, as is geography to the countryside" (p. ix).

By returning to the life-world of concrete existence that precedes the abstractions of scientific description – that is, by engaging in the activity of phenomenology – we are able to discover that things always appear within a context of meaning, or a web of significance. The world within which we live is a world best characterized as a field of importances, of things and others that are always already emerging from within the structure of our care and concern for them. Whenever science holds the pretense that it is concerned only with formal rationality, and leaves substantive rationality to the poets and philosophers, it denies the very foundation upon it moves and has its being. So, it is ironic that the supposedly ‘objective’ sciences often claim to discover truths behind the phenomena, which they then suppose are the basis for the meanings and values we hold dear, when, on the contrary, it is only upon the basis of these meanings and values that science is possible. This revelation, thankfully, saves science from itself, or more specifically, from the nihilistic current that would doom it to irrelevance.

To return to the main theme of this response to Dr. Wong, an existential psychology as a human science, like any other science, must maintain its fidelity to things as they appear – to the life-world upon which it has a meaning and ground. Once this is acknowledged, then we can proceed to further articulate the specific methods of investigation that might compose this human science psychology. However, the articulation of these methods of investigation must flow from an understanding that these methods serve a purpose, which is to enhance the importances that compose the context of significance of our experienced lives. The prediction and control that flows from the experimental method, for example, has significance to the degree that our predictions are used to enhance what is important and meaningful in the world rather than serving to exploit and corrupt these importances (Robbins, 2003). Since the experimental method itself is unable to determine how it should be used, we must found these decisions upon the careful, rigorous and systematic description of our experienced lives. This latter project is the
project of a phenomenological psychology, as described for instance by Giorgi (1985) and Moustakas (1994). Upon the basis of these phenomenological investigations, we can better decide how other methods of psychological science can be used in the service of our lives. Taken as a whole, this project constitutes an existential-phenomenological psychology.

In conclusion, I agree with Dr. Wong that an existential psychology can rightly lay claim to the value of both quantitative and qualitative methods of investigation. I simply wish to extend Dr. Wong’s statement to say that the qualitative description of life-world experience has a certain priority with regard to method. The qualitative meanings and values that compose our lives must be the basis upon which any further investigation of human beings and their worlds can proceed without losing sense. Upon this basis, a human scientific project can then remain faithful to the larger, existential project that gives priority to the concrete meanings that compose our lives, while remaining open to the value of the many methods of investigation available to us as scientists.

References


