A Response to Dr. Paul Wong’s Editorial

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I very much welcome Dr. Paul Wong’s (2004) incisive editorial and am grateful to him and his colleagues for having had the creative foresight and determined “can do” fortitude that has led to the creation of ISEPP. Let us all hope that this is the beginning of a great adventure.

Having been an active advocate of existential psychology and psychotherapy for quite a few years now, I share Paul Wong’s conviction that this is an optimal moment for the approach. I have never known interest in existential psychotherapy to be so great as it is today. Nor, perhaps more importantly, have I ever experienced such a willingness on the part of alternative models and systems such as cognitive psychology and consciousness studies to engage with, learn from and impact upon existential-phenomenological theory and practice.

Existential ideas have for too long been presented as being “too difficult”, “too abstract”, “too intellectual”, “too European” and “too doom and gloom laden”. One of the many beneficial effects that ISEPP may have will be to provide the means by which such assumptions can be opened to re-evaluation and correction.

I agree with Dr. Wong that existential psychology and psychotherapy must stand revealed as an inherently practical, life-focused approach. What seems to me to be central to this aim is the explication and examination of the distinctly inter-relational grounding from which existential psychology and psychotherapy arises. This, to me, is its most unique feature whose pivotal importance for an increasingly fragmented and individualistically-obsessed world will likely increase in significance during the first decade of the 21st century.

Paul Wong is undoubtedly correct in warning us not to remain slavishly fixed upon, and limited by, those philosophies which have been most closely identified with existential phenomenology. In one sense, all philosophies tell us something of worth regarding human living and experience and are, therefore, relevant to contemporary existential enquiry. At the same time, the foundational philosophies (and philosophers) from whose ideas existential psychology and psychotherapy arose retain a good deal of “practical wisdom” whose invaluable impact upon theory, research and professional practice is only in its preliminary stages of development. That we should continue to focus much of our attention and analysis upon these foundational perspectives as “ways toward” the development of existential psychology and psychotherapy does not require us to suppose that they will burden us with intellectual stagnation and remain the approach’s inevitable end-point.

Dr. Wong urges us to find new answers to the persistent dilemmas of our age. This is an enormous undertaking. It may be that existential psychology and psychotherapy’s initial contribution will be that of helping us to ask the necessary questions in novel and illuminating ways. To do so, an openness toward, and respect for, other related approaches and systems of enquiry is both appropriate and welcome. But we must be aware of the potential risks and unintended limitations that such openness may impose. It is Martin Buber’s sage warning that springs to mind here. If we embrace the

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other in order to subsume one another and make us “more alike”, we impose an objectifying restriction upon both self and other and, unintentionally, create a relation whose qualities and features fall into the “I-It” realm of encounter. It is only when we embrace “the otherness of the other” so that our encounter may reveal that which exists between us that the possibility of a human and humane engagement which approaches the “I-You” dimension becomes possible. The lesson is as valid for relations between systems as it is between persons and it is my fervent hope that we, as founding members of ISEPP, can take this to heart at such a central moment in the Society’s existence.

With appropriate concern, courage and curiosity – not to mention more than a smattering of good humour – let us take up the challenges that Paul Wong has outlined. Thank you for sharing your dream with us, Paul. Now let’s see how much fun we can all have in discovering its possibilities.

Reference