Psychoanalysis and Modernity: A Failure to Find Relief from Existential Terror

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PSYCHOANALYSIS AND MODERNITY: A FAILURE TO FIND RELIEF FROM EXISTENTIAL TERROR

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Clinical Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Clinical Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Psychoanalysis and Modernity: A Failure to Find Relief from Existential Terror

by

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This project considers the ways in which culture—the symbols and institutions that guide behavior and provide meaning to the individuals living within a community—serves a defensive function against conscious awareness of existential terror. The term existential terror refers to the cognitive and emotional experience of recognizing the inevitability of death, which is often accompanied by feelings of angst, isolation from others, and awareness of meaninglessness. In this dissertation, I will argue that the broad shift from traditional culture based on Judeo-Christian religious beliefs and communal forms of social life to modernity represents a slow but destabilizing deterioration of the defensive function of culture vis-à-vis existential terror. The reflexivity inherent in modern stores of knowledge (i.e., the chronic revision of information) makes certitude impossible and challenges the legitimacy of social institutions that provide an anchor for meaning in a society. The focus of this project is to analyze the effects on individuals and society living at a time in which the efficacy of the cultural defense has been weakened. I will argue that psychoanalysis emerged during a time of tremendous cultural flux and represents the de facto model of psychological defense in modernity, replacing religion as the primary cultural mode of meaning-making. I will argue that as system, psychoanalysis is doomed to fail in its mission, and will outline the reasons for this line of thought.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, culture, modernity, existential terror
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Introduction

Existential terror, at its core, is the conscious and unconscious fear of nonexistence. As we will see, this fear involves a host of cognitive and emotional components that make it a nuanced phenomenon. Our review of existential philosophy in chapter one will reveal the complexity of existential terror: it is not only a fear of death, but also a feeling of estrangement from others and a search for meaning for our lives. Additionally, it is a feeling of angst that defies concise articulation; an anxiety lurking beyond the surface that never fully abates; a numbness that seeks conformity with the masses; and an urge for freedom that presses for individuation.

Chapter one will continue with a focus on the work of writers such as Irving Yalom (1980) and Ernest Becker (1971, 1973), who utilized the concept of existential terror to formulate theories that explain the impact of human vulnerability on individual development and culture in the modern era. For those who privilege the role of existential terror in shaping the human experience, as do Yalom and Becker, the search for safety from death and groundlessness in our lives is the primary project of the self and the ultimate driving force of human behavior. A basic premise of this project is that the need to allay anxiety and gain mastery over these existential concerns prompts human beings to seek authority - individuals and social institutions that make one feel safe by living in accordance with the ideological and behavioral norms espoused by these figures and/or traditions. A second premise is that the reflexivity inherent in modern culture has made reliance on traditional forms of authority problematic, even impossible, leaving modern individuals in a state of existential crisis.

Chapter two will examine how Western civilization evoked models of authority based on the prototype of the child’s earliest relationship with caregivers as described by Becker and
Yalom. Freud (1927) articulates a similar theory to account for the psychological origins of religion, which had been the dominant cultural paradigm of authority (and defense against existential terror) for centuries. Rieff (1966) explains how modernity led to changes in the symbolic needs of culture. Unlike ancient “political man” who submitted to the rule of a political leader, or pre-modern “religious man” who committed himself to the controls of religious authority, modern “psychological man” must grapple with the crumbling notion of certitude and the ever-expanding role of subjective experience as a meaningful marker of reality that influences our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Giddens (1990, 1991) shows how discontinuous the modernity of psychological man is from pre-modern culture and how the conditions for ontological security have changed as a result. If the Enlightenment promised an alternative to religious faith by means of objective reason that would provide certainty through the acquisition of knowledge, we are now able to see the ultimate failure of this position. Far from providing certitude, the ever-changing, reflexive (i.e., subject to chronic revision) nature of contemporary culture lays bare the plight of modern men and women first recognized by existential philosophy: there is no absolute system to quell our anxiety; the notion of certainty is obsolete. Furthermore, the reflexive nature of modernity has wreaked havoc on tradition, emptying it of context and leaving little comfort in the act of looking to the past, just as it has weakened the ability of a localized authority figure to ease anxiety through absorption of our projections. Finally, Sass (1992) explores the impact of these changes on the lives of individuals through his juxtaposition of modernism and the modern illness of schizophrenia. In his work, we not only gain the texture of lived experienced of modernity, but find further evidence for the notion that historical models of defense against existential terror, however revamped, will continue to fail in the current social milieu.
Chapter three will explore the traumatic effects of the dislocation in the cultural paradigm of defense against existential terror by returning to existential philosophy and its intersection with emotional trauma as described by Stolorow (2011). This will be followed by a detailed inquiry into the cognitive process by which emotional trauma impacts the individual and society in Terror Management Theory. Finally, the cumulative impact of centuries of cultural change will be explored from the perspective of Elizabeth Young-Bruehl (2012), who suggests that the rise of tyranny in the 20th century was a response to this trauma (and a trauma-inducing phenomenon itself) as described by Mark Edmundson (2007).

Chapter four will examine the emergence of psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century in the context of a culture grappling with the increasingly reflexive nature of modernity in a world where the prior defensive structure against existential terror (i.e., religion) no longer functioned as an effective anxiety buffer. We will examine the diminished status of psychoanalysis in contemporary culture since the mid twentieth-century. Strenger (2015) suggests that psychoanalysis has an important message to deliver about the complexity of the self, but that in order to reach its audience, psychoanalysis as a discipline must find a way to reintegrate itself into mainstream culture. Beyond the practicalities of how psychoanalysis can stay relevant, I argue that psychoanalysis has already failed for three reasons.

First, psychoanalysis fails because all systems of meaning are doomed to fail. Psychoanalysis cannot eradicate the anxiety inherent in living, and thus will always be limited, as all systems are, by its ability to turn diffuse anxiety about human vulnerability into a concrete problem that can be addressed. The work of psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1995) will show how the psyche functions as a “concrete” location to act out the psychoanalytic solution to existential anxiety.
The second reason psychoanalysis fails is that it does not provide an effective buffer against existential terror in the form of externalized authority. Although Freud recognized that the need for authority stemmed from contact with vulnerability, he thought that with the right form of treatment people could rise above this need and assume a stance of “maturity.” Whitebook (2017) examines the limitations of Freud’s “project of modernity”—mourning the loss of internalized authority figures for the purpose of living a more authentic life—by showing how his preoccupation with rational forms of self-knowledge denies the deep-seated pull for merger with an external source of authority.

The third reason psychoanalysis fails has to do with the difficulty associated with achieving a state of “maturity,” and the question of whether such an accomplishment is desirable. Eva Illouz (2008) will provide a critique of the therapeutic narrative of self-help that evolved out of Freud’s articulation of the self as a subjective and knowable entity. She argues that an Americanized version of therapy has become synonymous with a self that is sick, and that failure to be cured is a failure of the self. The role, then, of psychoanalysis in the contemporary social milieu, I argue, is to help individuals live in society with as few constraints as possible in constructing a meaningful and satisfying life, while allowing for the fact that no person or system of meaning can unriddle the meaning of life or protect us from its hazards.
Chapter One: Existential Terror

Questions about the nature of human existence have been posed in myriad forms throughout history. Porter (2000) makes an astute observation about the progress of human reflection in response to the distressing state of the human condition:

Homer's man was not the introspective self-conscious being who populates Socrates’ dialogues a few hundred years later—indeed, The Iliad has no word for ‘person’ or ‘oneself’. Living and conduct, normal and abnormal alike, were rather seen as being at the mercy of external, supernatural forces, and humans are portrayed as literally drawn to distraction with wrath, anguish, or vengefulness. (p. 13)

The Greeks lived at the mercy and the whims of the gods until the naturalistic, reason-oriented thinking of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle emerged in the fifth century BC. The inclination to create order and meaning continues centuries later. Man’s fundamental vulnerability in the face of nature is perhaps the most perennial of human issues, and our starting point. Of course, humans are not the only vulnerable creatures; all of nature is vulnerable in some way to other aspects of nature. What makes the human predicament unique is our awareness of this struggle coupled with our efforts to overcome it by taming nature. This effort has been a work-in-progress since human evolution necessitated collaboration to care for prematurely born offspring, which substantiated the need for communities, language, and increasing self-reflective capacities. Human history then is the story of our ever-evolving attempts to continue this effort. In the external world, this project has been carried out with awe-inspiring feats in architecture, engineering, medicine, physics, the arts and technology. Internally, the quest for safety developed in the context of naturalistic and religious views of
humanity that gave us minds and souls we could use in a multitude of ways to cope with our corporeality and transcend its attendant vulnerabilities.

The aim of this introductory chapter is to lay the main problem of our vulnerability, experienced as existential terror, as a real problem at our feet, and to understand how we cope with existential terror as individuals and in the realm of culture. To do this, we must define the parameters of existential terror, explain its origins, and examine our response—as individuals and within culture—to this terror. We will start with a brief review of existential philosophy to explain why human existence is necessarily bound up with terror. From there, we will explore a contemporary psychoanalytic approach to existential terror by reviewing Yalom’s (1980) application of existential ideas to the work of psychodynamic psychotherapy. Then, to understand the origins of existential terror, we will turn to the work of Ernst Becker (1973), whose synthesis of existential and psychoanalytic theory provides a compelling narrative of the individual’s struggle to manage existential terror in the context of early development. Becker explains how and why transference developed as a necessary psychological tool for managing the overwhelming anxiety associated with human vulnerability and how the defensive construction of symbolic identity that originates in childhood is perpetuated by culture. Finally, we will review the empirical evidence that explains the cognitive processes that activate and maintain adequate defense against existential terror.

Existential ideas emerge in the nineteenth century

Existentialism is popularly known as a cultural movement that flourished in the café culture of artists and intellectuals in Paris following the Second World War. Although its roots can be traced back to nineteenth-century philosophy, especially that of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, existentialism reached the height of its influence in the twentieth-century
through the works of Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Jose Ortega y Gasset, and others. The term existentialism is notoriously difficult to define, in part because of the way the lines between its cultural and philosophical components are blurred: Many individuals affiliated with existentialism wrote works of fiction, poetry, and theatre with existential themes in addition to philosophical treatises. The influence of existentialism on the creative disciplines can be seen in the writings of Dostoyevsky and Kafka, the work of playwright Samuel Beckett, and the artwork of abstract expressionists Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. To claim that existentialism belongs to one domain or another would do injustice to its reach of influence during the period when existential ideas flourished.

The philosophical problem of existence. The works of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, despite their many differences, are considered precursors of existentialism and were first synthesized into an existentialist perspective by Karl Jaspers (1938) in his *Existenzphilosophie.*

In Kierkegaard’s view, classical modern philosophy (represented as Hegelian philosophy) is ill-equipped to grasp the problem of human existence because its focus on reason and universal systems obfuscates the personal, lived experience of the individual (Kaufmann, 1956/1975). His aim was to reconcile Christianity with the emergence of “the single individual,” one who must grapple with the question of existence (vis-à-vis faith) in a deeply personal way (Kierkegaard, 1846). For Nietzsche, the problem of existence arises when one realizes that the world is in a state of perpetual flux that defies fixed meaning and the possibility for order. Nietzsche is critical of absolute systems that lay claim to ordering the chaos (morality, science or philosophical metaphysics) or offer a transcendent reality (religion). With his famous declaration
that “God is dead,” (1883/2001, pg. 108) Nietzsche not only debunks the Judeo-Christian concept of god specifically but reveals the futility of all such meaning-making systems.

The similarity found in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche is the conclusion that the philosophical problem of existence cannot be answered in terms of absolute systems. Essentially, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche draw attention to the isolation, meaninglessness and freedom inherent in human existence. If science, religion, or any other external system of meaning is in fact meaningless, as they claim, how do individuals cope with the despair this knowledge evokes? Kierkegaard and Nietzsche responded to the question of despair, or nihilism, in different ways, but both emphasize the role of personal choice (based on subjective experience) as the only means for crafting a life that can feel meaningful, even joyful, when lived in the spirit of authentic creation.

**Major Themes of Existential Philosophy**

Existential philosophy illuminates the vulnerability inherent in the human condition by emphasizing the significance of personal experience and the fact that human beings are fundamentally meaning-making creatures. To articulate some of the main themes in this vein of thinking, we will review those most salient to our ongoing discussion about the development of existential thinking and their influence on psychoanalysis.

**Freedom.** If a single concept could be said to represent the cornerstone of existential thinking, freedom might be its seminal idea. According to Sartre (1943/1972), the human condition is one in which each of us is inherently free because we always have a choice about how to perceive and respond to every situation. To him, consciousness itself is freedom. The ability to take perceptual stimuli and interpret them in more than one way indicates a multiplicity of options, and this multiplicity has implications with respect to freedom.
Of course, the arbitrary familial and social circumstances that one is born into constitute a field of limitations over which one has no control. Sartre (1943/1972) refers to these circumstantial aspects of our lives as our ‘facticity;’ Heidegger (1927/1962) used the term ‘thrownness’ to describe a similar sentiment, and noted that even the fact of our birth (existence) is not of our choosing. Sartre and Heidegger agree that within the confines of these uncontrollable facts, we are always faced with the choice of how to respond to them.

That we have freedom, however, does not mean that any of our choices can be justified or that any casual explanation can be attributed to them. In the absence of an absolute system to guide our behavior and give meaning to life, the existential notion of responsibility for the creation of meaning becomes one of life’s greatest gifts and most burdensome challenges. We are, as Sartre (1943/1972) maintains, “condemned to be free.” Contact with this responsibility can produce a dizzying affect, a sense of groundlessness that Yalom (1980) suggests is worse than the anxiety one feels in anticipation of death. In response to this groundless feeling, human beings are naturally inclined to seek relief. Ironically, the impulse to seek relief from responsibility often gives rise to the creation of absolute systems. For existential thinkers, abdication of responsibility is a dangerous, if not understandable response, because it leads to an estrangement of the self, or, inauthenticity.

**Authenticity.** Alongside freedom, existential thinkers are almost universally preoccupied with the notion of authenticity. To represent oneself through living is to live authentically. These deceptively simple words imply a rather strenuous process of evaluating the way one lives through active self-reflection. For Heidegger (1927/1962), this means adopting a phenomenological stance that utilizes subjective experience to guide action. However, Heidegger is emphatic in reminding us that human existence (Dasein) can only be defined in relation to
living in a concrete world that is populated by others (Being-in-the-world). Authentic living acknowledges the role of others in the construction of our world without yielding authority over our life choices.

The notion that the external world is responsible for creating meaning in our lives is what Sartre (1943/1972) refers to as “bad faith” and Kierkegaard (1844/1980) considers falling in with the “herd.” When we live according to the expectations of others (the “herd”) rather than following our own desires, we have misrepresented our true self. For Heidegger (1927/1962), being part of the herd, or the “they,” is a natural state-of-affairs, one we are all subject to, and that requires a conscious effort to extract oneself from:

The Self of everyday Dasein is the they-self, which we distinguish from the authentic self—that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way. As the they-self, the particular Dasein has been dispersed into the “they”, and must first find itself. (p. 167, emphasis in original)

In this sense, inauthenticity is something of a starting point; without a crowd to stand back from there could be no individuality. But authenticity, like freedom, is a double-edged sword. The benefits derived from living in a way that is an expression of one’s true desires is tempered by the distress that is evoked by leaving the “tranquilizing” (p. 222) safety of the crowd (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

**Angst & death.** The term “angst,” often translated into English as anxiety or dread, was first described by Kierkegaard (1844/1980) to denote the unpleasant mental state that arises when we are confronted with certain realities of human existence (among them: freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and the absurdity of life). Kierkegaard is clear that angst is not fear, for fear, like anxiety, is a fear of something specific. On the contrary, angst is a nebulous feeling;
a nonspecific anxiety rooted in the desire for something of which we are not yet aware.

Kierkegaard explains that angst is closely linked to the awareness of possibility and freedom of choice:

Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence, anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs to dizziness.

(1844/1980, pg. 61)

Feelings of angst reveal our freedom and the consequence of choice as well as the absurdity of our existence when we realize that there is nothing, per se, that keeps us from making one choice or another. Heidegger (1927/1962) suggests that angst serves to bring us back from our absorption in the everyday concerns, of being part of the “they” that masks our situation as Being-in-the-world. Angst jolts us back into awareness of our need to shape our existence, and thus it promotes individuation: When the ordinary world “falls away” and “everyday familiarity collapses” (p. 233) we are forced to concede the outside world as an arbitrator of reality, which negates the role of the “they” in defining our world (Heidegger, 1927/1962). As Sartre put it in Being and Nothingness (1943/1972), angst reveals “a being which is compelled to decide the meaning of being” (p. 556). Angst then is a powerful emotion that renders the day-to-day activities of our lives meaningless and forces us to confront the fact that we are individuals who cannot rely on the external world for self-definition. In revealing the absurdity of life, angst awakens us to the freedom inherent in human existence and our responsibility to make choices that reflect our individuality.
If angst activates freedom and brings us back from unself-conscious living, death represents a “boundary situation” that makes meaningful living possible. Jaspers (1932) used this term to define those situations, including illness and death, which highlight the inevitable finitude of life. When failure is the only outcome, as in death, we are forced to confront the ramifications of this reality, and so the knowledge of death serves as a catalyst for contemplating freedom and our responsibility for creating meaning through authentic living. For Heidegger (1927/1962), death similarly serves as an anchor for meaning; without finitude, the act of sculpting our life into an authentic whole would have no value. There would be no purpose in contemplating our desires or the future, no reason to emerge from a state of forgetfulness, to individuate from the “they.” The anticipation of death helps us maintain a self-aware attitude with respect to our life that is essential for authenticity.

Influence of Existential Philosophy on Psychoanalysis

Psychiatrists working in the post-war era who sought to incorporate the ideas of Heidegger, Sartre, and others into Freud’s psychoanalytic theory developed what they called ‘existential psychoanalysis.’ The general impetus for this synthesis can be traced to a critique of Freud’s theory as being overly positivist and (therefore) reductionist. The following reviews the development of existential psychoanalysis from its beginnings to a contemporary theory.

Phenomenological psychiatry in Europe. In the years before World War II, European psychiatrists were exposed to a wide range of theories and clinical practice which led to a cross-fertilization of ideas. The beginnings of existential psychoanalysis can be traced to a few individuals who trained under Freud and his associates and were also familiar with the work of Heidegger and phenomenology, who tried to reconcile these unique but complementary ideas into a coherent theory and practice.
Daseinanalyse. Trained by Eugen Bleuler and C.G. Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger met Freud in 1907 and developed a lifelong friendship that endured despite later theoretical differences (Reppen, 2003). Binswanger’s primary critique of Freud consisted of the view, shared by many existentialists, that Freudian psychoanalysis endorsed the Cartesian subject-object split that assumed behavior could be objectively observed and classified (Needleman, 1967/2006). Influenced by the work of Edmund Husserl (1900-1901, 1913) and Heidegger (1927/1962), Binswanger married Freudian theory and phenomenology to create an existential psychoanalysis he called Daseinanalyse.

Medard Boss was also a Swiss psychiatrist with ties to Bleuler, Freud, Jung and other prominent analysts throughout Europe, and was introduced to Heidegger’s work by Binswanger before the Second World War. Boss was later mentored by Heidegger for a considerable period of time; under Heidegger’s influence, Boss (1982) adopted an existential perspective with respect to psychoanalysis and made significant contributions to the development of Daseinanalyse (Jenner, 2006).

As its name suggests, Daseinanalyse is based on a Heideggerian understanding of human being as Being-in-the-world: “Existential analysis ... does not have in mind the solidity of the structure of the inner life-history, but rather the solidity of the transcendent structure preceding or underlying a priori all psychic structures, as the very condition of their possibility” (Binswanger, 1958-1959, p. 80). Binswanger’s conception, while different from Freud’s, maintained loyalty to psychoanalytic technique, as summarized in the following:

Existential analysis, instead of speaking in theoretical concepts such as, for example, pleasure-principle and reality-principle, investigates and treats the mentally ill person regarding the structures, structural articulations, and structural
alterations of his existence. Hence it has not by any means consciousness as its only object, as uninformed quarters have often reproached it with, but rather the whole man, prior to any distinction between conscious and unconsciousness, or even between body and soul; for the existential structures and their alterations permeate his entire being. Obviously, the existential analyst, insofar as he is a therapist, will at least in the beginning of his treatment not be able to dispense with the distinction between conscious and unconscious deriving from the psychology of consciousness, and which is bound up with both its merits and its drawbacks.

Taking stock then of the relationship between existential analysis and psychotherapy, it can be said that existential analysis can over long stretches not dispense with the traditional psychotherapeutic methods; that, however, it can as such be therapeutically effective, only insofar as it succeeds in opening up to the sick fellow-man an understanding of the structure of human existence and allows him to find his way back from his neurotic or psychotic, lost, erring, perforated or twisted mode of existence and world into the freedom of being able to dispose of his own capacities for existence. This presupposes that the existential analyst, insofar as he is a psychotherapist, not only is in possession of existential-analytic and psychotherapeutic competence, but that he must dare to risk a committing of his own existence in the struggle for his partner-the patient's-freedom. (Binswanger, 1958-1959, p. 83, emphasis added)

Binswanger advocates use of psychoanalytic technique to help the patient confront the ways his or her world is currently structured, inviting him to examine how this construction
denies or conflicts with certain realities of human existence. Freedom, for the existential analyst, was measured by the capacity for self-creation in the face of his ultimate vulnerability.

**Logotherapy.** Viktor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist who developed a form of existential psychotherapy he called logotherapy. A student of Freud and then Adler, Frankl’s path eventually diverged from his mentors as he began to articulate the view that human beings are fundamentally meaning (logos) seekers. Following the war, Frankl’s ideas were received by a wide audience through his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946/2009), which described logotherapy in the context of Frankl’s real-life experience as a prisoner in a concentration camp.

Logotherapy operated with the understanding of a human being as constituting three layers of experience: somatic, psychic, and noetic (of the soul). While medicine could treat the soma and psychology the psyche, logotherapy endeavored to address the problems of the “unity” of an individual who is all these things at once. Following Nietzsche, Frankl did not believe that suffering in and of itself was necessarily a problem, if the individual could derive some meaning from it. Furthermore, he believed that self-fulfillment was a corollary of successfully finding meaning in one’s life and that neurosis represents a crisis of meaning or “existential frustration” in which the individual experienced conflict between values (Frankl & Batthyány, 2010). This crisis of meaning, what Frankl called a “noogenics neurosis,” was also a spiritual matter related to the health of the soul. The therapeutic aim of logotherapy is to aid the patient in finding meaning through developing a responsibility toward one’s life, without influencing the direction or form this meaning takes:

It is not Logotherapy’s concern that we therapists give the patient a meaning to his existence, but only that we enable him to find such a meaning, that we, so to speak, broaden his field of vision so that he will become aware of the full
spectrum of the possibilities for personal and concrete meanings and values.

(Frankl & Batthyány, 2010, p. 89)

Despite this seeming neutrality on the part of Frankl regarding the development of his patient’s values, he was nonetheless criticized by Rollo May and others for promoting theistic ideas about God that gave logotherapy an authoritarian tone (Pytell, 2006).

American influence on existential psychology.

Rollo May. May is credited with introducing European existentialism to America at a time when Freud’s ideas were being reevaluated within the field of psychoanalysis (Yalom, 1980). Although May is associated with the tradition of humanistic psychology, he and colleagues such as Gordon Allport, Carl Rogers, and Abraham Maslow were influential in disseminating the ideas of existential thinkers, especially Viktor Frankl, within academic institutions in the United States (Pytell, 2006). May himself wrote about topics such as anxiety with existential ideas in mind, describing anxiety as “our human awareness of that fact that each of us is a being confronted with nonbeing” (1950/1977, p. 363 emphasis in original). However, as Yalom’s (1980) commentary suggests, the difference between European and American existential thought was substantial:

“The European focus is on limits, on facing and taking into oneself the anxiety of uncertainty and non-being. The humanistic psychologists, on the other hand, speak less of limits and contingency than of development of potential, less of acceptance than of awareness, less of anxiety than of peak experiences and oceanic oneness, less of life meaning than of self-realization, less of apartness and basic isolation than of I-Thou and encounter” (p. 19).
Not surprisingly, the cultural differences in European and American perspective found its way into their respective interpretations of existential thought and the application to clinical practice.

**Existential Psychotherapy: A Psychoanalytic Application of Existential Themes**

Yalom is an American psychiatrist widely known for his contribution to contemporary existential (and group) psychotherapy. Yalom posits that most psychotherapists intuitively work with existential concerns but lack a cohesive set of principles and coherent model for addressing these issues concretely. He wrote *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980) to provide a theoretic framework for an existential model of dynamic psychotherapy. Yalom hoped the recommendations for technique he described would encourage clinicians to rethink the focus of their therapeutic attention and integrate a more classically psychoanalytic understanding of unconscious conflicts with what he called the four “ultimate concerns” – death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness.

Although Yalom is in full agreement with the psychoanalytic understanding of dynamic forces and the interplay of thoughts, feelings, and behavior, he disagrees with classical Freudians regarding the content of such forces. From Yalom’s perspective, existential sources of dread are more deeply-rooted relative to conflicts emanating from instinctual drives. In other words, the conflicts that psychoanalysts are used to working with are themselves manifestations of more primordial concerns. Regarding these “fundamental sources of dread,” Yalom (1980) writes:

“The individual’s earliest experiences, though undeniably important in life, do not provide the answer to this fundamental question. In fact, the residue of earliest life creates a biological static that serves to obscure the answer. The answer to the inquiry is transpersonal. It is an answer that cuts beneath any individual’s
personal life history. It is an answer that applies to every person: it belongs to the
human being’s ‘situation’ in the world” (p. 11).

Yalom suggests that an individual’s ability to confront such profound and disquieting
themes would likely come about only in times of extreme distress.

Like other psychoanalytically based theories, Yalom (1980) stresses the role of anxiety in
psychic adaptation to awareness of existential concerns. However, he alters the dynamic
structure (drive → anxiety → defense mechanism) in two important ways. First, he substitutes
“awareness of ultimate concern” for drive as the potential trigger of anxiety and defense. Second,
he recognizes two forms of defense: “conventional” defenses that ward off anxiety as it arises
from any source, and defenses those which are activated in response to existential concerns.
While his model aims to differentiate between anxiety that belongs to the individual’s life history
and that which is an inevitable part of the human condition, Yalom is careful to point out the
subtlety with which this differentiation is perceptible in treatment:

“The clinician working with a troubled patient is rarely able to examine primal
conflicts in pristine form. Instead, the patient harbors an enormously complex set
of concerns: the primary concerns are deeply buried, encrusted with layer upon
layer of repression, denial, displacement, and symbolization” (1980, p. 6)

Despite the complexity involved in teasing apart the threads of primary (existential) and
secondary (conventional) anxieties, he emphasizes the healing potential of this work when the
clinician remains attuned to the ultimate concerns and can encourage therapeutic change through
“psychic phenomena” such as “willing, assuming responsibility, relating to the therapist, and
engaging in life” (Yalom, 1980, p. 485).
Death. Yalom summarizes a fundamental tenet of existentialism by reminding readers that “death is the condition that makes it possible for us to live life in an authentic fashion” (1980, p. 31, emphasis in original). For Yalom, death is the ultimate concern. The fact that life requires death so that we might joyfully (per Nietzsche) experience it as an act of self-creation requires its omnipresence; death is always lurking under the surface. The implication of this fact, however, makes awareness of death an unwelcome phenomenon and one we spend a significant portion of our psychic energy denying. Denial however comes at a price. When we deny this fundamental aspect of our condition it inevitably leads to restrictions of experience to maintain the denial. Further, because death awareness is experienced as a vague dread of no-thing (per Kierkegaard) that cannot be located, the mind seeks to transform dread about death into anxiety about something. Recalling Rollo May’s (1950/1977) treatise on anxiety, Yalom (1980) reminds us that “anxiety seeks to become fear” (p. 207) of something concrete. For this reason, death anxiety in its purest form is rarely observed by the clinician.

Defensive paradigms. Yalom (1980) asserts that children are aware of death from a young age and are pervasively occupied with death and its attendant threat of annihilation. He suggests that fear of death is the original source of anxiety and that a child’s primary developmental task is to find an adaptive way of coping with the fear that its life will end. By latency, children have developed sophisticated modes of denial, adopting one of two main paradigms of defense – the ultimate rescuer fantasy and the belief in a personal specialness – which shape the general development of their character and serve as a foundation upon which other secondary (conventional) defenses are established.

Yalom (1980) argues that the child has a “deep belief both in his or her personal inviolability and in the existence of a uniquely personal, ultimate rescuer” (p. 95) that act as the
two primary defenses against the terror of death. The “ultimate rescuer” defense is based on the wish for fusion or merger with an omnipotent other that provides security and meaning. The prototype of the ultimate rescuer is the parental figure of the infant’s first years, but the role is easily transferable in later life to a host of external religious figures or deities, teachers, authority figures and social causes. In this structure, “safety” is assured by maintaining contact with the transference object, which generates the sense of feeling “tucked in” to the power of the other as described by Becker (1973).

The second major defense, the “belief in personal specialness,” is a state in which “one is templated with a sense of specialness, and summons this ready belief as a shield against death anxiety” (Yalom, 1980, p. 96). In this defense, the individual is completely preoccupied with himself and holds an “irrational belief” (p. 96) that he is exempt from the laws of nature that apply to all others (namely, death). In this way, there is “freedom” from nature, an attempt to deny nature and escape into the embellishment of the self. Each of these defensive structures is adaptive in that it assuages intolerable anxiety, but, as with all defenses, when adopted with rigidity it has the potential to generate maladaptive behaviors as well as a vague sense of not living one’s life authentically.

Of course, the sense that one is failing to live authentically, what Yalom calls existential guilt, is not likely to surface while shopping for groceries. Employing Jasper’s (1932) concept of death as a “boundary situation,” Yalom (1980) explains that experiences of terminal illness, near-fatal accidents or other severe disruptions in our general wellbeing jolt us out of the everyday and force us to confront the reality of death.

Freedom. As described above, the feeling we are likely to experience when contemplating our freedom is intolerable for most and results in what Yalom (1980) calls
“anxiety of groundlessness.” For many of us, this anxiety is combated by evoking the ultimate rescuer defense, which allays the discomfort by allowing us to feel tethered to something real. However, “as Heidegger and Sartre suggest, appearances enter the service of denial: we constitute the world in such a way that it appears independent of our constitution. To constitute the world as an empirical world means to constitute it as something independent of ourselves” (Yalom, 1980, p. 222, emphasis in original). So, a psychological defense is erected, perhaps to good effect, but Yalom argues that the existential guilt of surrendering one’s existence in this way has deleterious effects. The emptiness, stuckness and general malaise that prompt many individuals to seek psychotherapy is the result of abdicating responsibility for one’s life and the goal of the therapist, per Yalom, is to influence the will in such a way that the patient will be able to reclaim his or her desire and act based on emotional directives.

Isolation. Yalom differentiates among three types of isolation: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and existential. Interpersonal isolation is the kind of loneliness we experience when we are physically and emotionally distant from others. Intrapersonal isolation occurs when we have blocked a part of our experience from conscious awareness defensively, such as in dissociation or fragmentation of the self. Existential isolation, however, is the kind of separateness encompassed by the dictum “we are born alone and we will die alone.” Existential isolation is also connected to freedom and responsibility by the fact that in the end, if we can muster the strength to face reality, we must accept the “loneliness of being one’s own parent” (Yalom, 1980, p.357). Coming to terms with this reality by giving up the state of imagined fusion with a powerful other and engaging in the process of individuation is another major developmental achievement. When others no longer function as tools for avoidance of existential loneliness, the capacity for true mutuality and “need-free” love can develop (1980). In this
scenario, love is an expression of mutual recognition, support of and empathy for another that helps alleviate the pain inherent in existential isolation. As Yalom points out, successful therapeutic engagement with the issue of existential isolation helps heighten the patient’s capacity for intimacy while increasing his or her tolerance of limitations.

**Meaninglessness.** Existential philosophy exposes the unsolvable dilemma that even as humans progress in their search for meaning, “the only true absolute is that there are no absolutes” (Yalom, 1980, p. 423). Instead of prescribing a specific path, existential philosophy argues for the idiosyncratic development of meaning coupled with full engagement in the world. Yalom suggests that altruism, creativity, and self-actualization offer different avenues for engaging in activity that can feel pleasurable and provide meaning. Yalom (1980) connects these modes of meaning-making to Viktor Frankl’s work, noticing the role of internal (drive-oriented) pursuits as well as external (strive-oriented) activities in the achievement of self-transcendence.

**The Origins of Existential Terror: A Developmental Perspective**

Ernest Becker, a renowned anthropologist and Pulitzer-prize winning author of *The Denial of Death* (1973), incorporates the work of Freud, Otto Rank, Norman O. Brown, Erich Fromm, Kierkegaard, and others to hypothesize a developmental trajectory regarding the individual’s struggle with existential terror. Becker concludes that an existential fear of death is pervasive and that the active (and often unconscious) denial of death is a ubiquitous human striving that originates in the first months of life and continues to shape our developmental experience.

Becker’s treatise is a creative synthesis that emanates from the basic supposition that humans are terrified of their biological nature and find the task of integrating the reality of their animal self with their symbolic self impossible. According to Becker, deep and sustained
apprehension of death and its inevitability is fundamentally intolerable to human beings, so we turn away from the body as a defense against this knowledge and invest all our energies in promoting our symbolic identity. Becker argues that the symbolic self is a grand effort to transcend the physical reality of human life.

Becker (1973) traces the developmental path by which the individual’s investment in authority unfolds. He argues that an initial “fear of life” in which the totality of the infant’s helplessness and dependency threatens to overwhelm him is initially ameliorated by a rudimentary denial of separateness from the mother (i.e., narcissistic withdrawal), and finds a more sophisticated and permanent defense in the solution of transference. By transferring all the infant’s awe and terror to the person(s) of the parent(s), he can construct a source of power to bestow a sense of safety and comfort from the terror of vulnerability. The fear of life then morphs into a fear of death, or loss of the authority figure, and the child learns to conduct himself in accordance with the demands and preferences of his parents to keep them close. Over the course of development, the child constructs a sense of symbolic identity through which he can identify with important figures of his childhood, allowing him to repress the reality of his animal nature. The model of authority established in infancy perpetuates itself vis-à-vis culture, which exists to structure the symbolic identity by offering self-esteem in the form of sanctioned modes of being. In short, culture prescribes acceptable forms of self-esteem and articulates the appropriate means for achieving them. Culture thus serves as a primary defense against our animal nature and existential concerns by providing a sense of belonging and safety.

Fear of life / fear of death. According to Becker, the emergence of the symbolic self happens as a chain of events that begins with the infant’s first encounter with life. Becker’s work evolves many of Rank’s (1930, 1932, 1941) ideas regarding the significance of pre-Oedipal fears
regarding the infant’s initial “fear of life,” which is a precursor to the development of
transference as a psychological mechanism that helps the infant manage the terror associated
with its helplessness, that has as its consequence, a “fear of death.”

Drawing from an evolutionary perspective, Becker reminds his readers that the biological
underpinning of fear is the threat to continuity, and that self-preservation is based on accurate
appraisal of threats in the environment. Becker claims that rudimentary awareness of our
biological vulnerability is prematurely thrust upon us when we discover that we do not, in fact,
control our bodies or the world of others. In the face of an immature ego, Becker understands
primary narcissism as a necessary function of biology that reinforces the survival instinct:

The child is overwhelmed by experiences of the dualism of the self and the body
from both areas, since he can be master of neither. He is not a confident social
self, adept manipulator of symbolic categories of words, thoughts, names, or
places—or especially of time, that great mystery for him; he doesn’t even know
what a clock is. Nor is he a functioning adult animal who can work and procreate,
do the serious things he sees happening around him: he can “do like father” in any
way. He is a prodigy in limbo. In both halves of his experience he is dispossessed,
yet impressions keep pouring in on him and sensations keep welling up within
him, flooding his body. He must make sense out of them, establish ascendancy
over them. Will it be thoughts over body, or body over thoughts? Not so easy.
There can be no clear-cut victory or straightforward solution to the existential
dilemma he is in. It is his problem right from the beginning almost of his life, yet
he is only a child to handle it. . . . [W]hen they try to master the body, pretend it
isn’t there, act “like a little man,” the body suddenly overwhelms them,
submerges them in vomit or excrement—and the child breaks down in desperate tears over his pretense at being a purely symbolic animal. (1973/1997, p. 28).

**Narcissistic withdrawal.** It is important to note that Becker wrote at a time in which the idea of primary narcissism as an undifferentiated state with respect to the mother (and others) was still widely accepted in psychoanalysis, before infant research demonstrated the ability of babies to recognize difference, even indicate preferences for various smells, sounds and images (Stern, D.N., 1985). While the spirit of Becker’s discussion on the topic of narcissism is directed towards an understanding of the child’s early recognition of the duality of his biological/symbolic nature and the abject terror helplessness evokes, he nonetheless describes the earliest period of infancy as “the stage before the child is fully differentiated from his mother in his own consciousness, before he is fully cognizant of his own body and its functions—or, as we say technically, before his body has become an object in his phenomenological field” (p. 36). Given what we know now about early development, it is worth evaluating Becker’s statements in the context of a current understanding of narcissism to consider how the concept of narcissistic withdrawal from reality relates to the earliest experience of existential terror.

Writing from the perspective of a contemporary Freudian, Alan Bass (2000) suggests that some patients, those he refers to as “concrete patients” (p. 14), reject interpretation in analytic psychotherapy because it represents a level of differentiation that generates intolerable anxiety. The need for merger in these patients is so strong that self and object remain fused unconsciously so any perception that challenges the reality of separateness must be thwarted (i.e., reality is organized in service of defense). For these patients, “interpretation can be a differentiating trauma” (Bass, 2000, p. 8) which must be defended against. In Bass’ view, narcissism is explained as the “the potentially traumatizing impact of otherness or difference” (p. 53) that 2
that is later disavowed. Citing Lawrence Brown (1985), Bass posits a cognitive (if unconscious) recognition of differentiation coupled with affective rejection of the boundary between subject and object.

If we think for a moment about Becker’s (1973/1997) conception of narcissism as “the ballooning of the self in fantasy, the complete megalomaniac self-inflation as a last defense, as an attempt at utter symbolic power in the absence of lived physical power” (p. 220, emphasis in original), while keeping the mechanics of cognition described by Bass in mind, we can turn our attention to a more productive question about the origin of anxiety that induces narcissistic retreat in response to existential terror. Becker and Bass both refer to Freud’s (1926/1959) discussion of signal anxiety as a response to the danger of separation from the mother who manages the infant’s needs, without which, he would be exposed to “a growing tension due to need, against which [he] is helpless” (p. 67, emphasis in original). Freud goes on to say that “anxiety is seen to be the product of the infant’s mental helplessness which is a natural counterpart of its biological helplessness” (1926/1959, p. 68). With this understanding, we can argue that Bass’ conceptualization of narcissism refers more directly to the emotional resonance of helplessness described by Freud whereas Becker attempts to address both, emphasizing of course the biological helplessness and its role in promoting repression in response to physical danger and recognition of dependence vis-à-vis the mother.

**The symbolic self.** Following an initial period of narcissistic withdrawal from reality, Becker articulates the developmental process that leads to the emergence of the symbolic self by reformulating some of Freud’s concepts regarding infantile sexuality from the perspective of existential terror. To do this, he incorporates the work of Norman O. Brown, whose critique of
psychoanalysis in *Life Against Death* (1959) influenced Becker’s thinking about the individual’s struggle to overcome the terror of his animal condition.

Following Brown, Becker argues that “anality and its problems arise in childhood because it is then that the child already makes the alarming discovery that his body is strange and fallible and has a definite ascendancy over him by its demands and needs” (1973/1997, p. 30). Anality then is a microcosm for the problem of the dual nature of the human animal; one cannot escape basic physiology. In this way, the body becomes a horrifying reminder of our animal status. The mother—whose corporeality is more pronounced because of pregnancy, breastfeeding, and menstruation—comes to represent “biological dependence” (Becker, 1973/1997, p. 39) in the child’s eyes; a menacing status that encourages a devaluation of the mother in a self-protecting step designed to deny his own biological dependence:

> The wish for the phallic mother, the horror of the female genitals, may well be a universal experience of mankind, for girls as well as boys. But the reason is that the child wants to see the omnipotent mother, the miraculous source of all his protection, nourishment, and love, as a really godlike creature complete beyond the accident of a split into two sexes. The threat of the castrated mother is thus a threat to his whole existence in that his mother is an animal thing and not a transcendent angel (Becker, 1973/1997, p. 225).

This psychological maneuver, which essentially constitutes Becker’s reformulation of the castration complex (as set out by Brown, 1959), suggests that the child’s repudiation of the mother is necessitated by the intense vulnerability he encounters when confronted with the fact of his dependence (on the mother but more significantly, as an animal creature), a situation he solves by defensively focusing on the trauma of sexual difference. The mother, who is at first
imbued with all the power and majesty of creation, becomes the locus of the child’s horror when the narcissistic blow of her corporal fallibility is dealt (Becker, 1973/1997).

In response to this frightening discovery, per Becker, the child’s next thought is about his constitution and the possibility that he might be similarly flawed. The resultant identification of the child with the father is designed to neutralize the anxiety engendered by the dualism of human existence. Essentially, the child wants to evade the passive role his mother embodies and the inevitability of destruction that her biological role conjures up. For Becker, the Freudian oedipal project is rewritten such that the child triumphs over death (as opposed to castration) by rejecting the physicality of the mother and turning to the world of the father in search of symbolic transcendence.

Transference. With that in mind, Becker views transference as a strategy for allaying anxiety about the biological situation of the child. Becker suggests that use of the mother as a transference object reveals a sophisticated method of organizing potentially overwhelming perceptions by locating them all in one place: “The child takes natural awe and terror and focuses them on individual beings, which allows him to find the power and the horror all in one place instead of diffused throughout a chaotic universe” (Becker, 1973/1997, p. 145). In this way transference has the effect of “toning down” the potentially overwhelming effect of perceptual stimuli by locating its effects in the person of the parent. This protects the child (and later adult) from that dizzying feeling Yalom (1980) described when one lacks an anchor for his fears and meaning. In addition to toning things down, the transference object “beefs things up” by inducing a feeling of security, allowing the child to feel merged or “tucked into a larger source of power” (Becker, 1973/1997, p. 134).
Once the child has made use of his mother as a transference object to quell the initial terror of life, a new fear arises regarding union and merger and the necessity of maintaining proximity to the much-needed authority figure. Noting the irony of exchanging one set of troubles for another, Becker comments on the problem inherent in the “solution” of transference for managing existential terror:

He binds himself to one person to automatically control terror, to mediate wonder, and to defeat death by that person’s strength. But then he experiences “transference terror”; the terror of losing the object, of displeasing it, of not being able to live without it. The terror of his own finitude and impotence still haunts him, but now in the precise form of the transference object. (1973/1997, p. 146)

Becker expounds on the authority of the transference object as a developmental achievement of sorts whose raison d’être is to keep conscious awareness of existential terror at bay. This conclusion, which owes much to the work of Rank in connecting existential concerns with early development and later psychological functioning, is the cornerstone of Becker’s argument about culture and the primary importance of symbolic identity.

_Twin ontological motives of the hero system._ Although most of Becker’s discourse revolves around the fear of death, he is careful to highlight the life-affirming urge toward individuation inherent in the human psyche. In a complex and nuanced discussion of transference, Becker examines the “twin ontological motives” (1973/1997, p. 150) that underlie this ubiquitous phenomenon, namely the defense against death (discussed above) and the search for personal meaning. Essentially, Becker uses his insight into the fear of death and the human need for self-expansion to determine that transference is a necessary phenomenon that has the potential to make creative living possible.
Self-expansion. Transference is a mechanism that bolsters our sense of feeling safe and in control of our world; it is the scaffolding that makes the hero project possible. Becker argues that transference allows one to find meaning for one’s life “through heroic self-expansion in the ‘other’” (1973/1997, p. 157). Becker subtly differentiates between the sense of belonging and safety that is obtained from surrender to various transference paradigms (individual, cultural) and the platform it provides for making ourselves feel worthwhile through development of our individual hero project. In other words, Becker’s (1973/1997) conception of the hero system provides the individual, by means of “transference heroics” (p. 156), a sense of belonging that feeds the human need for connectedness and merger that simultaneously allows him to develop self-esteem and a sense of personal meaning in a safe environment. This “safe heroism” (p. 155) is just as life-affirming, according to Becker, as death-denying. Becker writes: “On the most elemental level the organism works actively against its own fragility by seeking to expand and perpetuate itself in living experience; instead of shrinking, it moves toward more life” (1973/1997, p. 21).

Expanding his discussion of transference to Eros, Becker explains that “the impulsion to stick out of nature and shine” (1973/1997, p. 153) is just as much a part of the human repertoire as the need to seek safety and control. This poses a problem because ‘sticking out of nature’ makes humans vulnerable and isolated, the very things we expend so much energy trying to evade. For Becker, the push and pull between safety and individuation is the primary preoccupation of human life. He concludes that, “how a person solves his natural yearnings for self-expansion and significance determines the quality of his life” (1973/1997, p. 156) and suggests that “to become conscious of what one is doing to earn his feeling of heroism is the main self-analytic problem of life” (1973/1997, p.6). The implications of this statement occupy
the rest of Becker’s thoughts in *Denial of Death* and invite us to think about the ways transference both fosters and inhibits human flourishing.

Clinically speaking, Becker accepts that transference is a distortion of reality, but understands it as a phenomenon necessary for living, one that reflects “the whole of the human condition” (p. 158). From this vantage point, he is less concerned with dismantling transference or resolving it as transforming it to meet the human need for creative living. The main problem of transference for Becker is not that it exists, but that it exists reflexively. However, as Becker (1973/1997) points out, such reflexive living is born of necessity:

Most people play it safe: they choose the beyond of standard transference objects like parents, the boss, or the leader; they accept the cultural definition of heroism and try to be a “good provider” or a “solid” citizen. In this way they earn their species immortality as part of an agent of procreation, or a collective or cultural immorality as part of a social group of some kind. Most people live this way, and I am hardly implying that there is anything false or unheroic about the standard cultural solution to the problems of men. It represents both the truth and tragedy of man’s condition: the problem of the consecration of one’s life, the meaning of it, the natural surrender to something larger—these driving needs that inevitably are resolved by what is nearest at hand. (p. 170)

What I find most compelling about Becker’s treatment of this issue is his compassion for the human condition. Becker humanizes the struggle for psychic equanimity in the face of existential terror by calling our attention to “the sheer terror of individuation, of difference, of being alone, of losing support and delegated power” (1973/1997, p. 211) and reminding us that
even Jung and Freud, for all their genius and accomplishment, could faint buying tickets to Rome.

**Culture as a Defense against Existential Terror**

Becker argues that self-esteem is essential for operating with a sense of security and comfort in the world, and that culture represents the primary vehicle by which self-esteem is constructed and maintained. Individual heroism, or *causa sui*, is the basic vehicle by which self-esteem is acquired, self-esteem being an essential ingredient for operating with a sense of security and comfort in the world. The culture one belongs to maintains the standards and values that allow one’s individual *causa sui* project to have meaning, and so the individual and the cultural are deeply interwoven and reinforce one another. In the service of denying our animal nature and the inevitability of annihilation, the individual’s heroism project becomes the fundamental problem of life:

It doesn’t matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. They earn this feeling by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things than man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. (Becker, 1973/1997, p. 5)
Here Becker draws our attention to the power of symbols as a means of defending against mortality and the function of society as a stage upon which the multiplicity of roles that make up an individual’s hero system are played out.

**Some remarks on Yalom and Becker.** I would like to pause briefly to consider some elements of Yalom’s and Becker’s work before proceeding further. Contemporary readers of both will find several aspects of their theory outdated or problematic and I wish to add some context to my use of their theories before proceeding further. This will allow us to extract what is central to their work and relevant to our discussion as well as making a case for why their ideas occupy a position of retired interest in the field some fifty years later.

**Existential concerns in early development.** Yalom and Becker claim that young children are aware of death from a young age, albeit in disguised form. Both articulate a developmental trajectory by way of explanation, Becker’s being much more detailed and nuanced than Yalom’s; however, neither can offer concrete proof for their claims. The truth is that we simply do not know the degree to which pre-verbal children have awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, of death and/or fears of annihilation that stem from awareness of their physicality. While Yalom’s defensive paradigms of the Ultimate Rescuer and Personal Specialness are in keeping with psychoanalytic notions of transference and narcissism, there is little evidence to affirm their uniqueness to existential concerns beyond an individual’s interpretation of psychic events.

Similarly, Becker’s notion of narcissistic withdrawal in early infancy may strike contemporary readers as dated at best, and inaccurate in light of contemporary infant research. Becker asserts that the infant’s lack of differentiation from his environment, specifically the body and care giving function of the mother or primary caregiver, constitutes his first strategy for
managing the terror associated with the dependency and helplessness of early infancy. This assertion, widespread in early psychoanalytic literature, was challenged in the 1980s and 90s by infant research which demonstrated infants’ innate capacities for interpersonal involvement from the beginning of life (see Morgan, 1997 for review). Becker wrote in the 1970s and was unable to profit from these advances in cognitive developmental psychology. To correct for this, I have incorporated Bass’ work on disavowal to highlight the importance of the emotional resonance that infantile helplessness has on the individual (that motivates the repression of such awareness). While infants are capable of more differentiation than Becker could have known, many psychoanalytic thinkers still consider the vulnerability of infancy to have an indelible impact on psychic development.

**Yalom – existential ideas to what aim?** Something that is bound to cross the reader’s mind is the question: What is the potential clinical benefit of viewing early development in terms of existential concerns? First, I would like to clearly state that this dissertation is not advocating for an existential psychotherapy in the sense that perhaps Yalom hoped his work would inspire. While I find the notion of existential concerns compelling, indeed a bedrock of the human experience, the potential for integration of these ideas into clinical work is far less determined. Most would agree that a great disservice is done to patients when their therapist’s philosophical ideas (which are different in this case from theoretical ideas that drive clinical intervention) frame the clinical encounter. While we may wonder about the degree to which an individual is struggling with any of the existential concerns mentioned above, it is important to keep in mind the fact that one rarely, or at least infrequently, engages with these “core” problems directly (a point that Yalom himself acknowledges). In fact, addressing existential concerns directly could
be quite detrimental to the treatment and the patient’s stability; other times, it could potentially enrich the treatment, if led by the patient’s inquiry.

Part of the problem with the notion of an existential therapy as its own model of treatment is that we would have a hard time distinguishing it from all-around sensitive and thoughtful psychotherapy (Phillips, 2015), which is another likely factor in its failure to draw increased interest in recent decades. Existential psychotherapy has not joined the ranks of evidence-based modalities for delivering treatment to specified clinical populations. Whether it would even be possible (or desirable) to do so is a separate question beyond the scope of this project.

**Becker – patriarchal notions of the female body and development.** A second critique of Becker’s work is the representation of the female body in early development. His depiction of the female body as a passive vessel juxtaposed with the (phallic) male figure as the primary carrier of symbolic identity, while consistent with classical theories of psychoanalysis, are problematic. Becker suggests that the child responds with horror to recognition of his mother’s “biological dependence” (demonstrated by menstruation, pregnancy, and breastfeeding), which coincides with the anal stage of development when the child begins to comprehend his own corporality, triggering awareness of his own frailty and finitude beyond his emotional dependence upon the mother. Again, we simply have no evidence for this. Further, given that Becker wrote in the 1960s and 70s when the feminist critique of classical psychoanalysis was already established, it is curious that Becker does nothing to incorporate a more nuanced view of sexual difference and gender in his theory.

**The value of an existential perspective.** That being said, I do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I have chosen to utilize Yalom’s and Becker’s work because both make
excellent arguments for the pervasive pressure of existential terror on the individual and society. This is the basis of my argument. For culture to be required to serve such an important defensive function, existential terror must be intrinsic to the human experience that requires significant effort to contain. My focus is on the defensive function of culture against existential terror, and analyzing the effects on individuals and society living at a time in which the efficacy of the cultural defense has been weakened.

**Diminution in stature.** Beyond some of the obvious criticisms of Yalom’s and Becker’s work, I believe that their ideas have diminished in importance over time for two reasons – First, because the generations most impacted by Becker’s work were still processing the events of the Second World War. This is the time in which theories of cultural and social change, especially Critical Theory, were at the height of their influence (and clearly influenced Becker). The project of that time was to address the cultural paradigm shift and the social changes that followed.

Since that time, we have, at least in a cursory way, acknowledged the broad change in Western society. More recently, the rapid changes in society brought on by advancing technology and a globalized economy have created other concerns that may seem more pressing. Contemporary intellectuals and popular culture alike are immersed in the problem of modernity’s rapid pace of change and its inherent reflexivity – the chronic revision of information that makes certainty impossible. What I hope to address is the way in which existential terror, which was present before this change has 1) become heightened because of the diminished capacity of modern culture to manage it, and 2) how this fact has been largely overlooked by psychoanalysis and culture more broadly. I will argue that the latter problem has arisen because it must – because full contact with existential terror is impossible for any individual, let alone culture.
This leads to the second reason why, I believe, the ideas of existential thinkers such as Becker and Yalom have diminished in importance over time. Becker urges his readers to consider how they go about earning a sense of safety in the world, that this is the “analytic project” of one’s life. If acknowledging one’s ultimate vulnerabilities, physical and symbolic, is indeed as frightening as Becker contends, then it would make sense that people shy away from a theory that does not have much to offer in the way of a cure for the crippling recognition of our finitude. Traditional culture contained existential anxiety with a robust belief system and model for social relations. Contemporary culture has failed to offer an adequate sense of distance from existential concerns, and so a theory that does not allay our anxiety in any meaningful way, but rather highlights it, is unlikely to gain favor with the majority. Theories that propose the option for transformation by way of explanation are more likely to garner favor in a world dominated by a kind of manic or hypomanic frenzy of activity meant to drive humanity forward, perhaps trying to outrun the terror.

**Empirical Support for Existential Terror**

Empirical support for the impact of existential concerns on human attitudes and behaviors is found in the research of Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). TMT operationalized the construct of existential terror through studies that investigate the outcome of mortality salience induction on a wide range of attitudes and behaviors. The literature utilizing this methodology is robust with over 300 experiments conducted (586 publications) in 12 countries and includes investigation into a wide range of topics including: prejudice, intergroup conflict and political attitudes (Greenberg, Landau, Kosloff, Soenke, & Solomon, 2016; see Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008, for a review); gender (Passalacqua, 2016); integrative psychotherapy (Major, Whelton, & Duff, 2016; Lewis, 2014);
awareness of death, anxiety and psychological wellbeing (Juhl & Routledge, 2016); post-traumatic stress disorder (Abdollahi, Pyszczynski, Maxfield, & Luszczynska, 2012; Chatard, Pyszczynski, Arndt, Selimbegovic, Konan, & Van der Linden, 2012; Kesebir, Luszczynska, Pyszczynski, & Benight, 2011); personality (Landau, Sullivan, & King, 2010); mindfulness (Kashdan, Afram, Brown, Birnbeck, & Drvashanov, 2011), the psychological function of art (Landau, Sullivan, & Solomon, 2010), the appeal of fame (Greenberg, Kosloff, Solomon, Cohen, & Landau, 2010); creativity (Routledge & Arndt, 2009); and a growing number of meta-analyses (Burke, Kosloff, & Landau, 2013; Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Martens, Burke, Schimel, & Faucher, 2011). TMT began with a small team of social psychologists in the early 1990s and has captured the attention of researchers across the globe in countries such as Austria, Canada, Israel, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The readiness with which TMT can be utilized to inquire into the ever-changing social landscape has allowed the theory and research model to remain relevant and expanded its reach over the past 25 years.

**Terror Management Theory.** TMT was developed by social psychologists, Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon to explore two general hypotheses about the process of defense in response to awareness of death: the first was an exploration into the ubiquitous need for self-esteem and the second a question about the prominence of cultural worldviews and the tendency for individuals to vehemently uphold their worldview when confronted with a competing version (each of these hypotheses is discussed in further detail below). Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon were deeply influenced by the work of Ernest Becker and incorporated ideas from a variety of existential and psychoanalytic thinkers including Kierkegaard, Freud, Otto Rank, Yalom, Norman O. Brown and Robert Jay Lifton. TMT rests on a central tenet of existential thinking, namely, that self-awareness enables human beings to
contemplate their mortality and that awareness of one’s vulnerability in the face of death has the potential to generate profound terror. TMT understands the potential for such terror to be, as Yalom (1980) suggests, lurking under the surface at every moment, and closely tied to the deep discomfort aroused in us by our animal nature. TMT argues that cultural worldviews function as a buffer against this terror (i.e., contribute to the denial of death) by providing meaning and self-esteem to those who uphold its beliefs and modes of conduct.

**Review of study findings.** While the focus of the discussion below will be on explaining the rational for TMT research and describing how studies were able to measure effect size of their target variables, it should be noted that the body of TMT research represents a significant and ongoing area of inquiry within social psychology. The following is a brief review of the literature, as reported by Greenberg, Koole and Pyszczynski (2004), to represent the scope of TMT research.

**Two hypotheses.** As described above, the authors of TMT proposed two general hypotheses to test their theoretical model. The first is broadly referred to as the “self-esteem as anxiety buffer hypothesis” which sought to test the effect of raising self-esteem on levels of anxiety following exposure to death-related stimuli. The second “mortality salience hypothesis” was developed to test the idea that cultural worldviews function as a defense against death awareness. In all studies, individuals were asked to contemplate their own death (i.e., mortality salience) before completing a condition related to the hypothesis under evaluation.

**Self-esteem.** Regarding the self-esteem hypothesis, one study demonstrated that when investigators raised a participant’s self-esteem artificially by providing fabricated data from an IQ or personality test prior to viewing videos of an autopsy and an electrocution, the physical arousal (measured by skin conductance) of the participants was lower than the control group
(Greenberg et al., 1992a). A second study showed that participants who similarly received an artificial self-esteem boost prior to the prime were less likely than the control group to rate themselves as more or less emotional when informed by the investigators that a particular tendency is associated with longevity (Greenberg et al., 1993). In these studies, self-esteem was found to moderate the effects of anxiety after mortality salience induction, suggesting that self-esteem acts as a barrier between the individual and death awareness.

*Mortality salience.* TMT researchers evaluated the second hypothesis utilizing the following approach: individuals were asked to participate in a study about personality attributes and interpersonal judgments. Following administration of basic personality assessments, those in the mortality salience condition were asked to respond in writing to questions about how the thought of their own death would make them feel, and what they imagined will happen to them as they die and when they are dead. Participants in the control groups were asked to write about their experience with benign activities such as watching television or eating. Following this exercise, all participants were asked to rate target individuals who upheld or violated valued aspects of their worldviews (e.g., religious affiliation, pro-American bias).

Significant mortality salience effects on attitude were found across numerous studies whereby conscious contemplation of one’s mortality resulted in the affirmation of a worldview as measured by positive attitudes regarding those who affirm such views and negative attitudes for those who do not (Mikuliner & Florian, 1997; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). Behavior effects of mortality salience were also found. For example, Greenberg, Simon, Porteus, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1995c) found that participants asked to use items of symbolic importance (e.g., American flag, crucifix) to do menial tasks following mortality salience induction performed the tasks slower and felt more uncomfortable than the control
group. Mortality salience was also shown to positively influence charitable giving, especially in cases of in-group affiliation (Jonas, Greenberg, & Frey, 2003).

A recent meta-analysis conducted in 2010 by Burke, Martens, and Faucher reports a moderate effect size ($r = .35$) for mortality salience manipulations across 164 empirical studies that utilized 277 experiments. Analyses of these findings provide convergent validity for the TMT data as the reported effects were consistent across a variety of populations and cultures and a range of methods for inducing mortality salience. Further, discriminant validity was established by showing how varying the operationalization of mortality salience did not alter the findings (i.e., participants could be asked directly about death, shown graphic footage of a car accident) and that the same effects were not found when participants were asked to think about other potentially distressing situations or topics that were not related to death, such as public speaking, a visit to the dentist, physical pain, etc.

**Relationship between self-esteem and mortality salience.** With support for the idea that self-esteem and cultural worldviews provide a defensive function in relation to death awareness, TMT researchers sought to better understand the relationship between self-esteem and mortality salience. Seven such relationships were shown to be significant (the following is taken directly from Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004):

1. If self-esteem serves to buffer anxiety, then worldview defense following mortality salience should be significantly reduced (or eliminated) (Harmon-Jones, Simon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & McGregor, 1997; Arndt & Greenberg, 1999).
2. Self-esteem-related psychological resources, such as hardiness (Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2001) and secure attachment styles (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003) reduce the effects of mortality salience, and deficits in such
resources, such as neuroticism (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, McCoy, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999) and depression (Simon, Greenberg, Harmon-Jones, & Solomon, 1996) increase mortality salience effects.


4. Mortality salience increases or decreases identification with entities that impinge positively or negatively upon self-esteem (Goldenberg, McCoy, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000).

5. Mortality salience leads people to alter their levels of identification with their own ingroups (gender, ethnic, and school affiliation) to protect and enhance self-esteem (Arndt, Greenberg, & Cook, 2002; Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, & Schimel, 2000; Dechesne, Jassen, & van Knippenberg, 2000).

6. Mortality salience influenced behavior likely to bolster self-esteem: mortality salience increased participants’ desire to amass wealth and possessions (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000); increased generosity toward favorite charities (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002); increased fitness intentions for individuals who valued personal fitness (Arndt, Schimel, & Goldenberg, 2003).

7. Mortality salience leads to self-esteem bolstering in the form of a self-serving bias. Specifically, Mikulincer and Florian (2002) found that mortality salience increased the self-serving attributional bias and Dechesne et al. (2003) showed that mortality salience leads to increased belief in the validity of positive information about the self, whether it came from horoscopes or personality tests.
Dual defense model. With sufficient data to support their initial hypotheses, TMT researchers set out to understand the cognitive processes at work when individuals are confronted with reminders of their mortality. Specifically, they were interested in the effect of unconscious primes regarding death on the effectiveness of self-esteem and cultural worldviews as anxiety buffering constructs. Pyszczynski, Greenberg and Solomon (1999) suggested a dual-defense model whereby different defensive processes are activated depending on the nature of the perceived threat (i.e., conscious vs. unconscious, situation-specific vs. universal). They hypothesized that in the case of conscious mortality salience induction, proximal defenses would be activated to buffer anxiety related to immediate and conscious death awareness whereas distal defenses would be utilized in the case of subtle or subliminal primes.

Proximal defenses were conceptualized as vulnerability-denying defensive distortions that are activated in response to an immediate threat that is within conscious awareness. Individuals were found to engage in three such modes of defense following conscious mortality salience induction: participants avoided activities that required self-focused attention such as looking in a mirror (Arndt, Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1998), suppressed thoughts related to death (Cook, Arndt, & Goldberg, 2003), and engaged in cognitive and motivational rationalization that reduced the participant’s sense of vulnerability (i.e., convincing oneself that what happens to others will not happen to them, at least not in the foreseeable future) (Greenberg, Arndt, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2000).

Distal defenses address the unconscious awareness of death by promoting behavior and beliefs that reinforce symbolic modes of death-transcendence, namely, reinforcements of self-esteem and/or exaggerated affirmation of cultural worldviews or rejection of different views. In support of the dual-defense model, Greenberg et al. (2000) found that following mortality
salience induction, (1) participants exhibited proximal defenses and not distal defenses, and (2) after a delay, distal defenses were detected but proximal defenses were not. Further support for this model was provided by a study conducted by Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus (1994) in which the cultural worldview (distal) defense was not detected when participants were made to keep thoughts of death in conscious awareness following mortality salience induction. Further, when mortality salience was initiated using subliminal stimuli of death-related content, the distal defense was immediately detected (i.e., no delay was required) (Dechesne, Jassen, & van Knippenberg, 2000). Taken together, the TMT literature demonstrates strong support for the notion that unconscious awareness of death encourages adoption of symbolic beliefs and behavior.

**Existential Terror: A Definition**

In this first chapter, we have traversed much ground to arrive at an understanding of the ways in which basic human vulnerabilities influence lived experience. The vulnerabilities we have defined include the awareness of our mortality; the inevitability of freedom and our responsibility for creating meaning; our separateness from others that cannot be bridged; and the knowledge that absolute or universal systems of meaning do not exist. In short, we have come to understand that the nature of these vulnerabilities is fixed, there is no solution. When confronted with the fact that our attempts to overcome these deeply scary and painful vulnerabilities are futile we are liable to feel terror. Existential terror, then, is defined as the awareness—conscious or unconscious—of the unsolvable nature of our basic human vulnerabilities and the futility of our efforts to counteract them.

We have seen how the affective resonance of helplessness in the first months and years of life that arises out of extreme and prolonged dependence, informs the developmental path that
leads to the use of transference as a psychological mechanism to defend against existential terror. Our psyche protects us from this terror by using anxiety as a signal that activates defenses that prevent such thoughts from reaching conscious awareness. Existential thinkers, including Yalom and Becker, modify Freud’s (1926/1959) theory of anxiety and repression from its focus on instinctual drives that could lead to object loss (and castration) to the child’s nascent awareness of his biological nature and the omnipresent nature of death more directly. In Becker’s model, the infant’s initial solution to this terror can be seen in the denial of cognitive and emotional recognition of separateness that helps the infant’s immature ego cope with the reality of its helplessness and dependence. We have refined this model by incorporating Bass’ concept of disavowal, which helps account for the infant’s capacity to differentiate (as demonstrated by infant research), but maintains the affective consequence of the infant’s need to feel merged with his primary caregiver. Ultimately, as development progresses the child begins to develop a symbolic identity that is based on transference to one’s parents and subsequent identification with their authority through culture. Yalom’s ‘ultimate rescuer’ and ‘belief in personal specialness’ paradigms of defense against death awareness share similar qualities in that the individual incorporates aspects of early relationships into his or her personality – either merged with the power of the parents, as in the case of the ultimate rescuer model - or narcissistically withdrawn from the environment (belief in personal specialness) to deny the inevitability of nature and its consequences.

As the theory and empirical research we have reviewed show, there are many ways to deny the vulnerabilities associated with existential terror and some are more effective than others. Among the most effective is the use of cultural worldviews. Cultural worldviews are essentially symbolic beliefs and behaviors that combat existential terror by making us feel
grounded in a world that is populated by other likeminded individuals. This allows us to feel safe, makes the behavior of others perceptible, and gives us the sense that we are part of something that will be around long after we are gone.

Chapter Two: Cultural Shift to Modernity Evokes Crisis of Authority

In the previous chapter, we explored how the denial of human vulnerability as exemplified by the ubiquitous fear of death is a pervasive element of the human condition. We examined the etiology of the cultural worldview as a defense against existential terror through examination of Becker’s (1973) theory that individuals cultivate the authority of caregivers to repress existential anxiety and craft a symbolic identity that is mediated by culture. Experimental Existential Psychology (EEP) further elaborated the cognitive process by which individuals use cultural worldviews to reinforce self-esteem, provide meaning, and ultimately defend against the anxiety that arises in response to conscious and unconscious awareness of death.

Our aim in the current chapter is to understand how existential terror operates at the level of culture. The argument I will make is that the shift from pre-modern or traditional culture to modernity represents a period of dramatic cultural upheaval in which the technological, economic, social and psychological changes that characterize modernity gradually eroded the effectiveness of religion (i.e., Christianity) as the incumbent cultural worldview defense against existential terror in the West.

Our first goal is to identify the psychological changes that occurred during this transition and understand why a new cultural paradigm of defense against existential terror became necessary. We shall see in Freud’s (1927) *The Future of an Illusion* how religion provided an elegant solution to the terror of nature in pre-modern culture because it recreated the infantile situation of dependency vis-à-vis the caregiver that could be readily projected onto a localized
figure of authority in the form of a deity and its affiliate clergy. Next, Rieff (1966/2006) describes how culture can only remain therapeutic (i.e., provide an effective buffer against existential terror) insofar as its symbols provide a compelling sense of self that can be maintained through adherence to a cohesive social identity. In the shift from traditional (i.e., religious) culture to modernity, individual subjectivity became an increasingly important facet of a rapidly changing world that required a new set of symbols to craft a meaningful social identity as the tradition of communal life began to fade. Then, Giddens (1990, 1991) explains how modernity represents a radical departure from traditional culture, and how the basis for ontological security has been transformed as a result of modernity’s increasing reflexivity. Strenger (2004, 2011, 2013) brings our discussion into the realm of contemporary culture and explores how the cultural emphasis on subjectivity – rather than freeing the individual and allowing them to live a life of authentic self-expression, has the potential to enslave the individual to a pursuit of “limitlessness” that breeds painful feelings of inadequacy that often results in isolation from others and a general sense that one’s life, however successful in objective terms, still lacks significance. Finally, the work of Sass (1992) will show how the reflexivity of the modern era has impacted the individual and culture through his analysis of the affinities between schizophrenia and modernism.

**Freud: The Psychological Origins of Religion**

From a perspective that privileges the fear of death and its attendant existential concerns as a basic motivating force in human behavior, the value in reviewing Freud’s interpretation of religion lies not only in his explanation of how religious belief functions for individuals and society, but in showing how deeply embedded the human need for authority is as a means of maintaining psychological equilibrium in the face of human vulnerability.
In *Future of an Illusion*, Freud (1927) takes up the issue of infantile helplessness and its role in organizing the psyche and promoting communal forms of social organization. Specifically, he emphasizes the terror of nature, calling it the raison d’être of civilization and the underlying factor in the ubiquitous human need for authority (and by extension, religion):

There are the elements, which seem to mock at all human control: the earth, which quakes and is torn apart and buries all human life and its works; water, which deluges and drowns everything in a turmoil; storms, which blow everything before them; there are diseases, which we have only recently recognized as attacks by other organisms; and finally there is the painful riddle of death, against which no medicine has yet been found, nor probably will be. With these forces nature rises up against us, majestic, cruel and inexorable; she brings to our mind once more our weakness and helplessness, which we thought to escape through the work of civilization. (Freud, 1927, pp. 15-16)

Freud goes on to elaborate on the psychological underpinnings of religion, suggesting that religious belief provides relief from an inescapable helplessness that has, at its root, an infantile prototype. Expanding on his explanation of infantile longing for the father initially put forth in *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13), Freud claims that the adult utilizes the same psychological mechanism to gain a sense of agency with respect to nature by utilizing the mechanism of transference to mitigate its helplessness:

When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child forever, that he can never do without protection against strange superior powers, he lends those powers the features belonging to the figure of his father; he creates for
himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate, and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection (1927, p. 24).

Just as the helpless infant transforms his father into an authority figure whose power is absolute, the adult creates god in the image of the father, thereby reproducing an infantile illusion of protection. The construction of god becomes necessary when the father’s authority eventually wanes due to developmental processes of individuation and recognition of his fallibility (i.e., he is only human). Unlike the human father, who is personally flawed and subject to physical decay, the authority of a celestial god endures and provides a timeless stability to which the grown child can faithfully submit. In exchange for this faith and its accompanying prohibitions:

The gods retain their threefold task: they must exorcize the terrors of nature, they must reconcile men to the cruelty of Fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them (Freud, 1927, p. 18).

Of course, the problem with this type of authority as described by Freud is that it is “nostalgically and oppressively patriarchal” (Edmundson, 2007, p. 150). In developing psychoanalysis, Freud aimed to free individuals from the need to submit to such rigid authority by deconstructing absolute systems of authority in the sphere of inner life. However, he was realistic about his chances for success at the level of culture, noting it would be a “hopeless” cause to dismantle religion by force, “and even if this did succeed it with some it would be cruelty” (Freud, 1927, p. 49). Freud likens religion to a narcotic or intoxicant that could not be taken away unless a substitute of equal potency was delivered in its place. For Freud, the development of one’s intellect and the scientific pursuit of knowledge (among other forms of
sublimation) provided a superior alternative to the oppressive nature of religious authority. While he admits that science and the intellect also carry the risk of becoming an illusion, he suggests that religion is ultimately a suboptimal solution to the problem of authority because it is “incapable of correction” (1927, p. 53) and verges on the delusional, whereas psychoanalysis, as a proxy for science, is open to revision and correction. Freud writes:

> Observe the difference between your attitude to illusions and mine. You have to defend the religious illusion with all your might. If it becomes discredited—and indeed the threat to it is great enough—then your world collapses. There is nothing left for you but to despair of everything, of civilization and the future of mankind. From that bondage I am, we are, free. Since we are prepared to renounce a good part of our infantile wishes, we can bear it if a few of our expectations turn out to be illusions. (1927, p. 54)

Finally, it is worth noting that despite Freud’s ability to recognize helplessness and vulnerability as a prime motivating force within the psyche and social organization, one that preceded and undoubtedly informed the work of Becker and Yalom, he remains decidedly focused on the coercive element of culture that protects society from the lapses of instinctual renunciation by individual members. He suggests that civilization, or culture, has two interdependent trends:

> It includes on the one hand all the knowledge and capacity that men have acquired in order to control the forces of nature and extract its wealth for the satisfaction of human needs, and, on the other hand, all the regulations necessary in order to adjust the relations of men to one another and especially the distribution of the available wealth (Freud, 1927, p. 6).
By 1930, when he published *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud’s writing about civilization emphasized this latter trend; his primary aim was to explain the origin of aggression from a psychoanalytic perspective vis-à-vis his theory of the death instinct. To his view, culture serves as a protective shield not against existential terror but against the innate passions of humankind, of which aggression was the most problematic and required extensive self-awareness to master. What Freud correctly identified was the shift in the perceived locus of these passions.

With the development of modern culture, sexual passions and the individual’s capacity for destruction took on a distinctly personal and intimate nature. He recognized, as we will see in the following section, that religion no longer provided adequate containment of these human instincts, as he saw them, and offered an alternative path to self-understanding through psychoanalysis.

**Cultural Change**

A cultural preoccupation with the distinctly personal experience of human existence and symbols of the ‘self’ emerged as incumbent symbols of religious authority began to fade in the early modern period. The void created by the decline of religious authority prompted adaptation of new solutions to buttress a sense of safety in the world.

Philip Rieff wrote two prominent books on the cultural significance of psychoanalysis in *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (1959/1979) and *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966/2006). In the latter, Rieff articulates a theory of culture as “therapeutic” that shares some fundamental points of view with Becker, though each develop their ideas to different ends. If Becker shows us why and how culture functions as a defense against existential terror from the perspective of the individual, Rieff explains the social function of culture and describes how and why cultural paradigms shift over time. Rieff—who wrote earlier than Becker—anticipated a central tenet of
Becker’s thinking when he describes culture as a platform for expansion of the self: “another name for a design of motives directing the self outward, toward those communal purposes in which alone the self can be realized” (Rieff, 1966/2006, p. 3). Although Rieff (1966/2006) acknowledges the defensive function of culture as a vehicle for “the control of panic and the filling up of emptiness” (p. 3) inherent in the human condition, his treatment of this issue ends with his comment that culture is a response to “the religious question: How are we to be consoled for the misery of living?” (p. 23). Rieff’s somewhat pithy engagement with the etiology of culture seems less like disregard than his taking it for granted, preferring to focus on the ways of coping with these “facts” rather than dwelling on their origin.

**Culture as therapeutic.** The function of culture, according to Rieff, is twofold. It exists first and foremost as a system of symbols, an implicit code of morals and communal goals that govern behavior, making the world of human relations mutually comprehensible and organized that is reflected in the institutions that represent its highest values (e.g., the church, the courtroom). Second, it must provide some relief from these controls by the way of sanctioned releases that reduce the pressure placed on individuals for conforming to prescribed value systems. Ideally, while in stasis, culture maintains an optimal tension between the requirements of regulation and reprieve that the majority of its members find acceptable. Culture, through its symbolic system of controls and remissions provides safety – and this security and comfort, in Rieff’s view, is inherently therapeutic. Culture changes when its symbols are no longer therapeutic for a growing number of its constituents, when personal safety and a compelling sense of self cannot be maintained through adherence to the collective identity. A similar idea is evident in Becker’s work, specified to Becker’s view of the individual as struggling between the need for safety and freedom vis-à-vis the cultural hero project:
We enter symbolic relationships in order to get the security we need, in order to get relief from our anxieties, our aloneness and helplessness; but these relationships also bind us, they enslave us even further because they support the lie we have fashioned. So we strain against them in order to be more free. (1973/1997, p. 56)

For Rieff (1966/2006), in times of culture change, the remissions become more compelling than the controls: “As cultures change, so do the modal types of personality that are their bearers” (p.2). Rieff laid out four types or leitmotifs of cultural character that describe broad periods of history in Western civilization: political man, religious man, economic man, and contemporary psychological man. The “political man” of antiquity relinquished personal freedom to the state in exchange for order and justice; whereas “religious man” subjugated his sensuous desires for future rewards in heaven; “economic man” is described as a kind of prototype of psychological man associated with early modernity and the emergence of Enlightenment ideals.

From positive communities to negative community. Rieff argues that the “positive communities” of political man and religious man represent cultural paradigms whereby members were guaranteed salvation (safety) by subordinating personal desire for the benefit of the community. The therapeutic experience of positive communities, also termed “commitment therapies,” (p. 57) is transformative; the therapists of positive communities are the clergymen who prescribe morality and offer themselves as models for acceptable living: “The function of the classical therapist is to commit the patient to the symbol system of the community, as best he can and by whatever techniques are sanctioned (e.g., ritual, or dialectical, magical or rational)” (1966/2006, p. 57). In contrast, “negative communities” do not promise salvation through
adherence to the collective good and thus the therapeutic experience is not transformative. According to Rieff (1966/2006), the psychoanalyst does not prescribe anything other than adherence to the “analytic attitude” (p. 23), which is accomplished through prolonged introspection and nonjudgmental exploration of the patient’s subjectivity:

The assumption of the analytic therapy is that there is no positive community standing behind the therapist. The therapist, therefore, can be neither sacral nor exemplary, but is rather an analyst. The resolution of the transference relation circumscribes the modal relationships to which the patient may aspire in his extratherapeutic relations, lowering his erotic illusions to a level where he is less vulnerable to fixation and disappointment. In sociological terms, commitment therapies are authoritarian, whereas analytic therapies are anti-authoritarian. (p. 64)

Rieff suggests that the analytic attitude was Freud’s gift to modern man; an alternative to the religious one, which had become defunct.

_Psychological man._ Rieff (1966/2006) argues that the changes in nineteenth-century Western culture necessitated a new therapeutic paradigm to suit the emerging individualism of modern society. When a cultural paradigm is on the edge of a tectonic shift, Rieff claims that adherence to the old paradigm becomes sickness-inducing. A fundamental mismatch in cultural controls and remissions became glaringly apparent during the eighteenth-and- nineteenth-centuries when the economic surplus of an industrial and technical civilization in the West no longer required the communal structure of strictly positive communities (i.e., those which demand subordination of personal or idiosyncratic needs for the benefit of the community, in exchange for the promise of salvation or safety). Once the definitive authority of the Church and
its structure for living was called into question, an emergent psychological ‘man’ could not maintain the split between a projected Christ and Devil as it became increasingly evident that both resided in his own psyche. Freud’s true genius, per Rieff, was articulating this massive revolution of culture. Stephen Gardner (2006) summarizes the most salient aspects of Rieff’s conclusions regarding psychological man in a critical essay published alongside the fortieth-anniversary edition of Rieff’s work:

The central faith of psychological man, a man who has rejected all other faiths, is the belief in his own freedom. In a world predicated on radical equality, he is compelled to maintain his own individuality, his power to be the master of himself. The idea of “uniqueness” is a defense-mechanism of democratic man, a main prop of the cultural revolution of democracy. (Gardner, 2006, p. 242)

The consequence of this fundamental shift from a community-based mode of social life dominated by patriarchal power structures to a society which privileges individual subjectivity represents a major paradigm shift in Western culture.

**Modernity represents a crisis of authority**

The sweeping paradigm change in Western culture described by Rieff is not just a phase or stop along an otherwise progressive line of cultural development; rather, it represents a radical departure from previous cultural models that rely on figurehead or patriarchal authorities to absorb the anxiety associated with existential terror. Modernity is the story of the gradual deconstruction of such localized authority in favor of diffuse systems of authority that are governed by ever-changing stores of knowledge that belong, in essence, to everyone and no one.

Unlike previous changes in the cultural paradigm described by Rieff in which the shift represented a transition from the surrender of one type of desire to another in exchange for
security (e.g., personal freedom for justice; sensuous desire for salvation)—mediated vis-à-vis relationship to a localized authority (e.g., political leaders, religious deities)—contemporary men and women must contend with a world that lacks such obvious exchanges and authority figures. In other words, existential anxiety in contemporary culture is not clearly defined—it has not yet become a concrete problem that can be managed through appeals to obvious forms of authority. This crisis of authority is perhaps the defining characteristic of modernity, something that continues to play out with tremendous geopolitical consequence as the increasingly globalized world must grapple with an intolerable sense of being stuck in a state of perpetual psychic limbo.

**Modernity is a distinct and discontinuous cultural paradigm.** Perhaps no contemporary scholar has written more extensively on modernity than Anthony Giddens, a renowned sociologist and prolific commentator on the development of modern social institutions. According to Giddens (1990, 1991), modernity does not reflect the continuous evolution of prior historical periods. He rejects the approach of social evolutionism, with its linear and unifying construction of history as a viable means for grasping the importance of this major cultural transformation:

*The changes occurring over the past three or four centuries—a tiny period of historical time—have been so dramatic and so comprehensive in their impact that we only get limited assistance from our knowledge of prior periods of transition in trying to interpret them (p. 5).*

Instead, Giddens (1990) argues that the modern era represents a period of profound transformations from which a unique social order that is fundamentally discontinuous from pre-modern culture has emerged. As a result, the conditions in which ontological security can be obtained and maintained have undergone radical transformation as well. Understanding this
aspect of the transition from pre-modern (traditional) to contemporary culture will be the focus of our inquiry in this section.

**The discontinuities of modernity.** To begin, we must develop a sense of what differentiates the social institutions of modernity from traditional forms of social order, and how this variation has been so impactful with respect to ontological security. Giddens (1990) defines the basic parameters of modernity as “modes of social life or organisation which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence” (p. 1). From here, Giddens highlights three discontinuities central to the distinct nature of modernity: the pace of change, the scope of change, and the nature of modern institutions. The pace of change refers to the extreme speed in which conditions change in the modern world, a velocity of change that was unknown and unimaginable in traditional culture. Second, the scope of change has become global, meaning that innovations in modes of transportation and communication have created a world that is interconnected, and, as a consequence, “waves of social transformation crash across virtually the whole of the earth’s surface” (Giddens, 1990, p. 6). Finally, Giddens suggests that the “intrinsic nature” of many of the institutions derived from the conditions of modernity—the political system of the nation-state, dependence upon inanimate power sources (e.g., nuclear energy, oil and gas), and the commodification of goods and services—are unique to this historical period (1990). These discontinuities are notable for their extensionality and intensionality – that is, the degree to which they promote their globalizing influence, and the way in which they modify the nature of daily life at the most basic levels. Above all, Giddens (1991) stresses the extreme “dynamism” of modernity, noting:
The modern world is a ‘runaway world’: not only is the pace of social change much faster than in any prior system, so also is its scope, and the profoundness with which it affects pre-existing social practices and modes of behavior (1991, p. 16).

Understanding this runaway quality of the modern world is central to perceiving the fundamental shift which lies at the heart of the radical dislocation of authority and the struggle to attain ontological security in our time.

*The dynamism of modernity.* Giddens (1990) accounts for the dynamic quality of modernity in terms of three elements or influences: the separation of time and space, disembedding of social systems, and the reflexive ordering and reordering of social relations.

The first, separation of time and space, refers to the displacement of time and space from “place.” In traditional culture, social activity was organized in the context of a localized place. With increased mobility and the invention of widely distributed mechanisms for keeping track of uniform measures of time (e.g., mechanical clock, calendar), time and space took on an increasingly standardized, and thus interchangeable or swappable, quality.

The second element of modernity’s dynamism, the disembedding of social institutions, is characterized by Giddens (1990) as “the ‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space” (p. 21). One no longer needs to personally deliver a message, or physically provide goods in exchange for delivery of other goods or services (i.e., barter). Much of what we do is accomplished by proxy, based on symbolic tokens, such as money, that infer a particular meaning that allows us to interact with our environment in a predictable yet completely impersonal way. The same goes for expert systems, such as the postal service (or the internet), which we rely upon to circulate messages on
our behalf. Money and the postal service are designed to work the same for everyone, in every context, and together, represent single elements of countless “abstract systems” that make the modern world go round.

Trust is critical to the working of these disembodied or “abstract” systems in a way that is distinctive of modern culture (Giddens, 1990). For example, the exchange between consumers and proprietors of goods and services relies on the trust each party has that the other side will reliably fulfill the obligation that the exchange of money represents (and trust in the legal system designed to enforce such obligations). Similarly, the use of transportation systems (e.g., rail, air) or seeking a medical consultation requires trust in the experts who operate, maintain, and interpret these specialized systems. Trust in the context of modernity is a special topic we will address at more length in the forthcoming section regarding ontological security.

**Modernity’s reflexivity.** The third, and most important element of modernity’s dynamism for our discussion, is its inherent reflexivity. Per Giddens, “modernity’s reflexivity refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, to chronic revision in the light of new information or knowledge” (1991, p. 20). This reflexive quality of modernity, the constant updating and upgrading of our knowledge base and social institutions is perhaps the most salient departure from pre-modern life. Let us consider this in greater detail: Social behavior in pre-modern culture was monitored in terms of the habits and rituals that had been handed down from generation to generation. The consistency of doing what had always been done, with minor revisions to accommodate gradual developments in culture, organized social activity and suffused it with meaning. With the advent of writing, the printing press and widespread literacy, knowledge became like time and space in the sense that it was displaced from the local context and could be examined in its own right. As a result, the legitimacy of ideas
and behavior could be ascertained vis-à-vis inquiry that was no longer tied to the authority of a tradition rooted in the past (i.e., it became objective), even if the habituating tendency of tradition has allowed its influence to linger. The modern world has therefore become increasingly preoccupied with “objectivity” while adopting a forward-looking stance with respect to the development and application of knowledge.

*Consequences of reflexivity.* The advantage inherent in this shift is the meaningful enhancement in the quality of human life that such reflexivity affords by mitigating nature’s hazards through manipulation of the material world. Unlike individuals living in pre-modern societies, advances in medicine, engineering, and many other fields have made us relatively impervious to the once unpredictable and unmanageable forces of nature (e.g., weather, disease, childbirth). The price of this reflexivity, however, is not inconsequential for it exposes the underlying uncertainty inherent in *all forms* of knowledge:

What is characteristic of modernity is not an embracing of the new for its own sake, but the presumption of wholesale reflexivity—which of course includes reflection upon the nature of reflection itself.

Probably we are only now, in the late twentieth century, beginning to realise in a full sense how deeply unsettling this outlook is. For when the claims of reason replaced those of tradition, they appeared to offer a sense of certitude greater than that provided by preexisting dogma. But this idea only appears persuasive so long as we do not see that the reflexivity of modernity actually subverts reason, at any rate where reason is understood as the gaining of certain knowledge. Modernity is constituted in and through reflexively applied knowledge, but the equation of knowledge with certitude has turned out to be misconceived. We are abroad in a
world which is thoroughly constituted through reflexively applied knowledge, but
where at the same time we can never be sure than any given element of that
knowledge will not be revised (Giddens, 1990, p. 39).

Succinctly put, the reflexivity of modernity underscores the reality that knowledge does
not equate certitude. By shoring up security in the physical world, an undoubtedly beneficial
achievement, we have nevertheless inherited another form of insecurity in the form of
incertitude: Nothing can be taken for granted in a world in which everything is subject to
revision. Existential thinkers realized this at a cognitive level far earlier than Western culture was
able to assimilate this massive revelation in thought vis-à-vis incremental changes in lived
experience.

**Conditions for ontological security undergo fundamental shift in transition to modernity.** Giddens’ primary argument is that the discontinuities of the transition from pre-
modern or traditional culture to modernity have fundamentally altered the contexts of trust and
risk that promote ontological security. Furthermore, the evolution of modern society from its
traditional mores as they relate to social and familial ties to the rise of the individual and a focus
on the importance of interpersonal relationships has radically altered the conditions in which
modern men and women can achieve a sense of ontological security in contemporary society.

**Environment of trust.** As mentioned above, the overriding theme of trust in modernity,
according to Giddens, is trust in abstract systems. The shift from trust based on localized
relations of kinship ties and local community that predominated in pre-modern culture to one that
emphasizes abstract systems and personal relations built on intimacy illustrates the extensionality
and intensionality Giddens (1990) refers to in his initial description of modernity. Due to the
increasingly global milieu of the modern world, the significance of ties to one’s locality and
place of origin (be it family of origin, nationality) lose their binding nature. While kinship ties and local community remain important with respect to the development of self-identity, they are no longer fixed aspects of one's life trajectory.

Similarly, religion and tradition no longer structure social experience or the physical world through steadfast belief and time-honored ritual as they did in pre-modern culture. Instead, the reflexivity of human-generated knowledge and modern social institutions have created a world in which self-determination reigns as the defining method for creating a sense of security and reliability in relation to the social and physical world. This makes modern men and women perpetually future-oriented because the past no longer tells us anything definitive about the present or future; quite the opposite, focus on the future helps us feel secure because the inevitability of change is the only thing we can reliably anticipate. Because of this radical shift in trust, the environment of risk— the danger human beings must concern themselves with in relation to elements of trust—has also undergone significant change.

**Environment of risk.** In pre-modern culture, the primary danger to human beings involved nature – natural disasters and diseases that were often unpredictable and largely outside the realm of human containment or control. Modern men and women, on the other hand, enjoy relative security from these dangers. On the contrary, the greatest dangers faced in modernity are the direct result of human intervention, or the reflexivity of modernity itself. For example, the risk of human violence that existed in pre-modern culture was localized in the sense that violent outsiders (e.g., armies, invaders) aimed their aggression at specific territories or peoples; the propensity for violence in one territory might look quite different from that of another. Modernity, however, faces what Giddens (1990) calls “high-consequence risks” that are unique in the sense that they apply to all the earth’s inhabitants (i.e., are global in nature) and are the
direct result of human intervention (i.e., the result of reflexive knowledge). These risks include the threat of ecological disaster, nuclear warfare, the collapse of economic markets, and the rise of totalitarian “superstates,” to name a few. The global nature of these risks has created an environment of risk that bears an apocalyptic feel: “high modernity is apocalyptic, not because it is inevitably heading toward calamity, but because it introduces risks which previous generations have not had to face” (Giddens, 1991, p. 4).

As a result of this secularization of risk, religion no longer offers the same protection, or poses the same threat that it did in traditional culture. When the key dangers that face humankind are in fact man-made, the danger associated with a fall from grace loses its primacy as a major threat to ontological security. Considering this reversal, the threat of personal meaninglessness becomes a far more prominent concern in modernity. When religious beliefs and rituals no longer provide the bedrock of meaning for social life and confronting nature, a void becomes apparent, one that must be filled by continuous interpretation and renewal of the self. This is what Giddens (1990) terms the “reflexive project of the self.”

The insecurities Giddens describes engendered by modern reflexivity and the project of the self draw sharp lines of contrast between traditional and modern society. One domain in which the implications of these radical shifts can be readily seen is in the realm of interpersonal relationships, specifically the evolution of gender relations.

*Environment of interpersonal relationships.* In *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Giddens (1992) explains how the reflexivity of modern society, beginning in the eighteenth-century, set in motion new patterns of relating between men and women that transformed personal relationships and social structure in contemporary culture. Over the course of the past several centuries, modern society has moved from its use of the surveillance of sexuality as
means of maintaining gender-based power dynamics to one in which sexual autonomy and emotional intimacy became the basis for contingent relationships in which multiple permutations of sexuality can flourish.

*The construction of female sexuality as a social control.* With the second industrial revolution, women from lower classes were driven by economic necessity to join men in the workplace, while the bourgeois women of Victorian society were confined to the home and tasked with raising children (Zaretsky, 2004). In the context of this and other major economic and social developments, family size contracted and sexuality was freed from its historical connection to reproduction (Giddens, 1992). The discovery of “plastic sexuality” (Giddens, 1992)—sex for the sake of pleasure—coincided with the increasing presence of women in the public domain and instigated the surveillance of female sexuality as a means of maintaining patriarchal structures of power in Western society. As a result, a woman’s sexual “purity” became her primary currency while men maintained the freedom to engage in episodic sexuality. This double standard was justified by the notion of biological essentialism and retained its influence so long as it remained unchallenged by women (Giddens, 1992).

Giddens (1992) claims that the simultaneous rise of romantic love as the primary driver of heterosexual coupling helped maintain the double standard of patriarchic authority even as it hastened its demise: “Romantic love presumes that a durable emotional tie can be established with the other on the basis of qualities *intrinsic to that tie itself*” (1992, p. 2, emphasis added). Although though the ideal of romantic love existed largely in fantasy, disseminated through romantic novels, Giddens interprets its robust presence during the nineteenth-century as a signal of hope regarding women’s desire to become active agents in the creation of self-identity vis-à-vis the romantic relationship:
The women in modern romantic novels are mostly independent and spirited, and have consistently been portrayed in this way. The conquest motif in these stories is not like the male version of sexual conquest: the heroine meets and melts the heart of a man who is initially indifferent to and aloof from her, or openly hostile. The heroine thus actively produces love. Her love causes her to become loved in return, dissolves the indifference of the other and replaces antagonism with devotion. (1992, p. 46)

Per Giddens description, the woman’s agency is concentrated in her emotional prowess, she “captures the heart” (p. 46) in an active demonstration of her power in the realm of affective experience: “The heroine tames, softens and alters the seemingly intractable masculinity of her love object, making it possible for mutual affection to become the main guiding-line of their lives together” (p. 46). In this way, Giddens shows how women used deprivation as a source of generative power, developing strength in the realm of emotional life that was then utilized in the struggle for gender equality.

_autonomy reveals “problematic” male sexuality._ Women’s power in the realm of emotional life translated into power in the public domain during the twentieth-century as the availability of contraception increased alongside a growing female workforce during the World Wars. The rise of economic and sexual autonomy eventually sought expression in the way women were no longer content to play strictly functional domestic roles. Instead, they sought enhanced emotional intimacy with their partners and the quality of the relationship (intimacy) began to gain prominence over marriage as an institution of social life. Giddens (1992) locates the advent of “confluent love” in this emancipation of women from the strictly domestic sphere of life. Confluent love is based on emotional equality; it “only develops to the degree to which
intimacy does, to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to
the other and do be vulnerable to that other” (p. 62). While this development was driven by the
expansion of women into previously male-dominated domains of public life and the emotional
competencies they had cultivated during their time in rigid domesticity, men were not as well
prepared for the shift in gender relations:

In Western culture at least, today is the first period in which men are finding
themselves to be men, that is, as possessing a problematic ‘masculinity’. In
previous times, men have assumed that their activities constituted ‘history’,
whereas women existed almost out of time, doing the same as they had always
done. (Giddens, 1992, p. 59, emphasis in original)

Giddens argues that while women were able to overcome the problematic nature of their
sexuality, namely, its restriction, men are just starting to address the problematic nature of their
sexuality, which lies in an ‘underdeveloped’ capacity for emotional intimacy. It is important to
note the fact that Giddens is describing overarching transitions in culture that necessitate an
overgeneralization with respect to individual experience and does not take into account theories
of gender construction and identity that developed in tandem over the past 25 years.

Moving towards a “pure relationship.” Giddens (1992) argues that the appreciation of
plastic sexuality in its episodic form, that is, a preoccupation with the body that represents
creative expression of self-identity, is inherently subversive to the reign of male sexuality as the
dominant position in society. Autonomous female sexuality devoid of stigma, and
homosexuality, are examples of plastic sexuality that push against oppressive notions of
“correct” sexual behavior and identity (Giddens, 1992). A second subversive element comes in
the form of the “pure relationship,” which Giddens defines as:
A situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it. (1992, p. 58)

The pure relationship is the result of the transformation of intimacy that promotes emotional equality as well as sexual freedom. Although the pure relationship is far from representing the norm in contemporary culture (Jamieson, 1999), we see evidence of its flourishing in growing pockets of society. What’s more, and to Giddens’ (1992) main point, the development of the pure relationship demonstrates the reflexive nature of modern society in our cultural journey towards a freedom based on equality.

Although remnants of patriarchal society and the effort to control nature are still present in our social institutions, tremendous change has nonetheless come about as a result of the changes in personal relationships between men and women outlined by Giddens. At this point I would like to turn our attention to the modern preoccupation with the self and the accompanying sense of heightened anxiety and loneliness that are its inevitable companions.

Giddens notes that modern culture is not inherently more or less anxious than traditional culture; rather, the content and expression of anxieties have changed. A major challenge for the modern individual is the reflexive project of the self, that his or her own psyche requires constant attention in ways that were unnecessary or ritualistically accomplished in traditional culture. In conclusion, ontological security is no longer achieved, as in pre-modern culture, through participation in communal forms of life; rather, it depends upon development of a sense of self that is simultaneously stable and capable of adaptation to the inevitable changes in context that define our contemporary social world.
Extreme reflexivity and the project of the self in contemporary society. Carlo Strenger, a Tel Aviv-based psychoanalyst and philosopher, has written extensively (2004, 2011, 2013) about the influence of existential concerns on contemporary culture. Building on Becker’s work, Strenger (2011) argues in *The Fear of Insignificance* that the individual’s project of building self-esteem has become increasingly difficult in a culture that values the “illusion of omnipotence” (p. 2) above all else. Specifically, Strenger takes issue with the fallacy of limitlessness endorsed by contemporary society and our obsession with celebrity, which he sees as is a thinly-veiled projection of the fantasy that we can be loved simply for the sake of our being (as small children are loved by their parents). For Strenger (2011), freedom is not found in the absence of limits; rather, it is achieved through “active self-acceptance” (p. 89), which involves facing the failure inherent in human existence and grappling with the complexity of our individuality. In this vein, Strenger (2011) argues that contemporary culture’s focus on limitlessness breeds “permanent instability of self-esteem and doubt about the sense of leading a significant life” (p. 2) that has created a much more isolated individual who has difficulty coping with basic human vulnerability.

**New Cosmopolitans.** Strenger describes how globalization of the world economies and culture—vis-à-vis the revolution in communication technology—has created a new social and economic class of New Cosmopolitans (2013; *Homo globalis*, 2011) whose identities are defined by their standing in a global network of professionals, and who prioritize creative work and financial success over commitment to their national, ethnic or religious communities of origin (2013).

These individuals place a high value on their subjectivity and seek professional and personal outlets that give them the opportunity and freedom to create that which feels
intrinsically meaningful to the them: “The development of individuality was no longer toward a cosmic truth but toward authenticity and a connection with an inner truth to which the individual needed to be true to live a life truly worth living” (Strenger, 2011, p. 75). In addition to freedom and subjectivity, experimentation with the self is a quality highly prized by the New Cosmopolitan. Echoing Giddens’ (1992) discussion regarding plastic sexuality and episodic sexuality as a forum for experimentation with the self through preoccupation with the body, Strenger (2004) comments: “Anything from one’s professional career, to one’s hair color, to one’s body shape, to one’s sexuality is subject to experimentation. Lives and selves are there to be designed, and contemporary culture presents a wide array of styles that can be used” (p. ix).

The “permanent instability of self-esteem.” In the context of a global community that exacts high standards for achievement and personal success, Strenger suggests that New Cosmopolitans experience a heightened fear of insignificance in a world in which “the sky now seems to be the limit” (2013, p. 270). From the perspective of self-esteem and Becker’s notion of the hero project, New Cosmopolitans are at a disadvantage relative to earlier generations in that their pool, or pond, is measured on a global scale.

Given the importance of self-esteem as a primary buffer against death awareness and existential terror, Strenger’s point about the increasing fragility of the New Cosmopolitans self-esteem suggests a major deficit in the current cultural paradigm. Elsewhere, Strenger (2011) comments on how recent cultural developments have “induced permanent instability of self-esteem and doubt about the sense of leading a significant life” (pg. 2). Further commentary reveals two additional effects of this phenomenon on the character development of many New Cosmopolitans. First, Strenger (2013) explains that the gifted but socially awkward character of
many New Cosmopolitans breeds formidable isolation owing to an implicit insecurity and off-putting arrogance frequently demonstrated by these individuals.

The tendency to feel isolated or shunned from the larger group, coupled with a sense of specialness that comes from significant intellectual talent, “leads most New Cosmopolitans to develop a visceral antagonism to mob situations; they see natural groups as a source of danger; they are always wary of the tendency of groups to attack those who are different” (Strenger, 2013, p. 272). This low-level paranoia is an interesting phenomenon that signals a fundamental difference in experience compared to traditional models of culture. Groups, rather than serving as a source of comfort and safety as they have in all traditional societies, are experienced by the New Cosmopolitan as a source of anxiety.

The concomitant feelings of specialness and alienation attributed to this “elite” class of New Cosmopolitans is a phenomenon reported in other segments of contemporary society, as we will see in the following section. In the next section, we will examine a similar phenomenon of concurrent isolation and a feeling of specialness from the perspectives of artistic sensibility and extreme mental fragmentation. The commonality of experience among these groups lends further support to our hypothesis that there is something fundamentally destabilizing about modern life for individuals across the spectrum of personal circumstance and experience.

**Schizophrenia and the paradox of modern thought**

Psychologist Louis A. Sass approaches the theme of reflexivity in modern culture by showing how the structural features of schizophrenic illness—primarily its dualities of detachment and hyperreflexivity—bear remarkable resemblance to works of modern literature and art by figures such as Franz Kafka, Charles Baudelaire, Samuel Beckett, T.S. Eliot, Salvador Dali, and others. In his *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature,
and Thought, Sass (1992) makes thought-provoking comparisons between schizophrenic illness and modernism, primarily to show how culture has adopted to the rapid changes in Western society described above. In doing this, Sass takes us into the world of lived experience. Translating Giddens’ theoretically-bound notion of reflexivity into a phenomenological description of what it means to live the life of a modern individual—albeit at the extreme—Sass shows how these experiences have nevertheless become incorporated into the cultural symbols of our time through literature and art.

Sass’ foray into the artistic mindset of the time provides qualitative texture to this historic change. What appears most striking is the sense of vertigo that seems to permeate the world of the artist and the schizophrenic patient alike. The dizzying groundlessness prominent in the thinking of existential writers comes alive when trying to make sense of the experience of the schizophrenic patient and the modern artist. We are left feeling lost, askew; moreover, and perhaps worse, is the accompanying feeling of isolation rendered by experience that is so radically idiosyncratic and ephemeral, adrift from any base of shared knowledge or experience. My aim in the following section is to take a step inside the qualitative experience of groundlessness and isolation that have come to dominate the lived experience of modernity and examine the impact of this remarkable shift on the individual and Western culture-at-large.

The doublet of modern thought. Sass argues that modern thought, like schizophrenia, is dominated by two features—extreme alienness and hyper-reflexivity. The starting point for Sass in his journey to articulate the modern psyche begins with the discovery of consciousness itself and the radical shift in philosophical thought that occurred when the human mind became a constituting force of reality rather than a passive recipient of external experience (i.e., Kant’s Copernican Revolution). According to Sass, the most immediate effect of this shift in thought is
the paradoxical effect it has on our understanding of consciousness itself. He argues that just as
the status of consciousness was elevated and conscious self-reflection gained prominence as the
sine qua non of human experience without which nothing could be said to exist, it was
simultaneously lowered when it became an object of study, something to be observed in a
detached manner in the empirical tradition:

Thus the Kantian categories—from one standpoint the transcendental foundation
of the relevant universe—were also facts in this universe, sometimes understood
as the product of natural forces, and existing (in some sense) side by side with
other objects of knowledge, on the same plane with other empirical phenomena
such as atomic structures, pancreases, and bird migration patterns. (1992, p. 329,
emphasis in original).

In other words, that which we know (because our conscious mind perceives it) can be
called into question because the process by which we perceive it (consciousness) is irrevocably
part of the natural order which itself is subject to its own sets of laws and constraints and is prone
to a certain blindness to itself. According to Sass (1992), if consciousness is indeed a “thing
among things” (p. 332), a requirement if it is to be housed in the realm of objective entities, then
the modern man’s quest for absolute enlightenment is unachievable. Sass views this modern
quest for absolute enlightenment as a kind of delusion:

In Foucault’s view, it is the failure to recognize these impossibilities that is the
key blind spot at the core of the modern episteme; it is this that dooms modern
thought to a fundamental instability, a constant shuffling between incompatible
alternatives. Modern man nevertheless remains obsessed with promises to
unriddle the universe; yet all the while this prospect of perfect enlightenment, of
utter awakening to the truth about the self, is the source of the greatest delusion.

Foucault compares it to a sleep—a sleep ‘so deep that thought experiences it paradoxically as vigilance’ (p. 332).

Reflexivity means we will never know for certain, because what we know is always subject to revision. This knowledge has the effect of making the individual feel small, impotent, and lacking an anchor in the world. The uncertainty inherent in this reflexivity can have the effect of leaving one to feel groundless; or, alternatively, Sass argues the groundlessness can pull for an over-inflation of the self’s importance to the point where it is dislocated from ‘objective’ reality. To highlight the ways in which some individuals, and modern Western culture at-large, have responded to the destabilizing effects of this reflexivity, we will delve deeper into Sass’ description of the schizophrenic experience.

**Duality in schizophrenia.** Sass describes the schizophrenic’s internal world as oscillating between two seemingly incompatible stances of acute disengagement with the world and a heightened sense of self-importance whereby “searching for the self can dissolve it” and “the sense of awesome ontological power can devolve into a kind of abject metaphysical terror” (p. 325). In the following section, we will address both sides of this detachment and the response to reflexivity that give rise to the duality described above.

**Detachment and alienation in schizophrenia.** Sass (1992) notes that the onset of schizophrenia is often precipitated by a perceptual and emotional experience characterized by stages or phases of gradual detachment from the world of social engagement and shared meaning, something akin to what is commonly known as the prodromal phase of schizophrenia. Sass utilizes the German term *Stimmung* to capture the process, which he further breaks down
into four distinct modes of grappling with the domains of people and objects (unreality, mere being, fragmentation, and apophany).

Broadly speaking, the process is one in which an individual on the verge of a psychotic break begins to experience changes in perception whereby individuals and/or objects in the world take on an unreal quality (or become hyper-real) and the world itself begins to feel unreal and inauthentic; where fragmentation of objects and systems once perceived as belonging to a whole “disintegrate into a disunity of parts” (Sass, 1992, p. 50) and the individual feels that he or she is “surrounded by a multitude of meaningless details” (p. 50.). The fact that the world exists at all can become a focal point for the individual; one that can be saturated with feelings or wonder and/or dread. Another essential aspect of the process Sass (1992) describes is apophany: “Once conventional meanings have faded away (Unreality) and new details or aspects of the world have been thrust into awareness (Fragmentation, Mere Being), there often emerges an inchoate sense of the as yet unarticulated significances of these newly emergent phenomena” (p. 52). At this point, the individual comes to see significance in everything that happens around him or her. Everything is a sign, nothing is coincidence.

According to Sass, this process of detachment marks one of the main features of schizophrenia: a kind of radical alienation from the world of shared social and perceptual meaning. It is not just that individuals turn away from interactions with others, which they do, but their perception of the world becomes so profoundly different and idiosyncratic that it becomes unintelligible to others: “One might describe the central feature of the schizophrenic mind as a disconnectedness, an unmooring from practical concerns and accepted practices that allows consciousness to drift in unexpected and unintended directions, and to come to rest in strange orientations” (Sass, 1992, p. 127). This breakdown in shared or consensual meaning
occurs as the individual retreats deeper and deeper into his or her internal world. The fact that symptoms of schizophrenia are broad, often transient in their presentation, and bizarre, make the illness unique. Sass finds these two qualities—heterogeneity and bizarreness—to be equally present in the work of modern artists; to my mind they are significant when thinking about what it means to live in a culture driven by uncertainty and lacking obvious models of transference-based authority.

The heterogeneity of schizophrenia. Sass notes that the symptomology of schizophrenia “defies all attempts to bring its features within the grasp of any overarching theory or model” (Sass, 1992, p. 26). Instead, what Sass observes is the overwhelming heterogeneity of an illness that demonstrates a diverse and often dramatic course:

Schizophrenics can be hypersensitive to human contact but also indifferent. They can be pedantic or capricious, idle or diligent, irritable or filled with an all-encompassing yet somehow empty hilarity. They can experience a rushing flow of ideas or a total blocking; and their actions, thoughts, and perceptions can seem rigidly ordered or controlled (exhibiting a ‘morbid geometrism’), but at other times chaotic and formless. They will sometimes feel they can influence the whole universe, at other times as if they can’t control even their own thoughts or their own limbs—or, in what is one of the supreme paradoxes of this condition, they may have both these experiences at the same moment (1992, p. 26).

Sass suggests that the historical vacillation in psychiatry between wider and more narrow classifications of schizophrenia is an attempt to impose order on an otherwise order-defying heterogeneity of symptoms. Recent changes to the diagnostic framework set forth by the DSM 5 in 2013 illustrate this point. In this latest version, subtypes of schizophrenia (paranoid,
disorganized, catatonic, undifferentiated, residual) were eliminated for reasons of instability of their clinical presentation and lack of scientific validity and reliability. Currently, the presence of at least one of the following symptoms of psychotic disorder is required to make the diagnosis of schizophrenia: delusions, hallucinations, and disorganized speech (in addition one more symptom which may include disorganized or catatonic behavior, or negative symptoms). In this revision, marked distortions of perception and cognition have been singled out as the basic feature of schizophrenic psychosis. Given schizophrenia’s wide range of symptom manifestation the medical profession has chosen—perhaps reactively but certainly out of necessity given the lack of empirically-supported alternatives—to increase the specificity of its diagnostic criteria. Sass argues that psychiatry does not adequately take into account the holistic set of factors that contribute to schizophrenic illness. That is not to say he ignores or negates a neurobiological contribution to the development of schizophrenia and mental illness in general (he devotes an entire chapter to this topic in his considerable appendix); rather, Sass is drawing attention to the fact that despite decades of research and theorizing in the fields of psychiatry and psychology, strong causal explanations regarding the etiology of schizophrenia are still lacking (though corollary evidence for connections between various genetic and environmental factors is widely accepted).


Schizophrenia and the bizarre. In addition to the heterogeneity inherent in schizophrenia, Sass notes one other striking feature of the illness – the bizarreness of its symptoms. Unlike other forms of psychotic mental illness such as mania, the speech and behavior of schizophrenic patients are often unintelligible to the observer. In Sass’ view, the “alienness of its characteristic signs and symptoms” (1992, p. 27) sets schizophrenia apart from other variations of mental illness. Though meaning can be made in the clinical encounter with many individual
schizophrenic patients and their treatment providers, no general theory or protocol is available to aid clinicians in deciphering the utterances and behavior of the patient with any kind of validity and reliability. As a result, there is a kind of incomprehensibility that often impedes the clinician’s task of engaging with the patient and constructing a sense of the patient’s experience from a place of shared meaning.

Reflexivity in schizophrenia. The other side of the duality Sass purports is a kind of self-exaggerated importance or solipsism that makes the world conform to the whims and will of the patient, such that the schizophrenic individual often portrays himself or herself as a god or capable of total omniscience and/or omnipotence. When one is not anchored, they are free to float high above the world and impose their will as they see fit. However, as Sass (1992) notes, these states of extreme grandiosity operate in tandem with the detachment and alienness described above. The line between “awesome ontological power” (p. 325) and “metaphysical terror” runs thin for these individuals. In fact, what Sass’ discussion illuminates the most is the seemingly inescapable oscillation between extremes that has come to define modern experience.

Drawing inferences from these insights, it seems that the modern individual—lacking a sense of being anchored to an irrefutable doctrine of meaning, authority, or purpose—is forced to turn toward inward and derive meaning, authority and purpose vis-à-vis the self. However, in some cases, and perhaps more globally when we expand the discussion to culture, the self is either not sufficiently developed, or simply cannot shoulder the burden of such weighty existential demands. Sass argues that schizophrenic illness appears to demonstrate heightened awareness into the paradox of modern life:

In the course of this analysis, one of the great ironies of modern thought gradually emerges: the madness of schizophrenia—so often imagined as being antithetical
to the modern malaise, even as offering a potential escape from its dilemmas of hyperconsciousness and self-control—may, in fact, be an extreme manifestation of what is in essence a very similar condition (1992, p. 10).

That is not to say that Sass believes schizophrenic individuals are somehow more enlightened or truly reality-oriented than non-schizophrenic persons—he is explicit about the fact that schizophrenia constitutes a real illness with neurological underpinnings whose impairments in functioning often result in debilitating outcomes for the afflicted individual—however, he sees the schizophrenic individual as far more complex and self-aware than is commonly recognized in the medical literature. From his perspective, the distortions in perception and seemingly primitive, often unintelligible modes of speech and behavior observed during the course of a schizophrenic illness are important phenomena that warrant description—not necessarily for etiological or explanatory purposes—but because they say something about what it means to be stuck in the paradox of modern thought - unable to find a comfortable equilibrium or stable sense of self among seemingly incompatible alternatives.

*An act of volition?* Sass suggests that the bizarreness of schizophrenic symptoms and their opaqueness is significant and meaningful just as the detachment of the artist is used in the service of seeing the world anew. At this point I would like to address a possible motive for the bizarreness of schizophrenic symptoms: namely, whether utility to this bizarreness can be found. Sass addresses the notion of volition by questioning the traditionally accepted model of cognitive deficit in schizophrenic illness: “The patient, it seems, is plagued not so much by diminished awareness or ability to concentrate as by hyperawareness, a constant, compulsive need to exercise his own consciousness” (Sass, 1992, p. 68). The key here is the word plagued – the schizophrenic individual cannot help but attend to stimuli to the point of disruption of other
important cognitive processes, regardless of the level of discomfort or distress it causes them. Sass acknowledges that this inability to exercise choice in what they attend to may be due, or at least reflects, suboptimal neurophysiological functioning (i.e., over-activation in areas of the brain responsible for executive functioning, for example, or under-activation in areas that control automatic responses). At the same time, however, Sass notices that the patient’s ability to filter his or her attention appears selective in many instances and not necessarily the result of global incapacity:

Schizophrenics, compared to normal individuals, were found to be more easily distracted by tape-recorded voices only when these voices were speaking of topics related to the patient’s delusions; also, schizophrenics seem less likely to be distracted by outer than by inner stimuli—that is, by the normally unnoticed workings of their own minds (1992, p. 71, emphasis in original)

Sass argues there is a certain passivity with respect to action; the schizophrenic experiences compulsive awareness but is helpless to redirect or titrate his or her attention, which results in a certain loss of agency. The Stimmung experience, Sass concludes, is part strategy and part deficit. The schizophrenic’s descent into strangeness and the bizarre “seems to occupy a kind of anxious twilight zone somewhere between act and affliction” (Sass, 1992, p. 74). If this passivity represents both act and affliction, what utility can we ascribe to it? What purpose does a potentially willed loss of agency serve? A thoughtful answer cannot be given without drawing culture into the mix.

Duality in modernism. The first point of contact between schizophrenia and modern culture that Sass elucidates is their shared complexity and the problematic task of describing either satisfactorily with any kind of unifying framework:
If schizophrenia is to be comprehended psychologically, I would suggest that its interpretation must be intimately tied to its very diversity and incomprehensibility; what better place, then, to seek analogies than in the culture of the modernism/postmodernism—that ‘tradition of the new’ where bafflement and pluralism are the rule? (1992, p. 27).

Giving additional context Sass writes:

What, after all, could dadaist [sic] art—celebrating chaos and mocking all aesthetic values—have in common with the ordered neoclassical formalism of the later T.S. Eliot? What could the austere rationalism of Mondrian or the Bauhaus share with the neoromantic dream-logic of surrealism? (1992, p. 28)

This brief commentary on the wide-ranging sensibilities and aesthetics that abound in modernism suggests it would be nearly impossible to house it all under one roof. But Sass makes the effort and arrives at a framework of seven salient characteristics—avant-gardism; perspectivism and relativism; dehumanization; derealization; spatial form; aesthetic self-referentiality; irony and detachment—that bears resemblance to the symptomology of schizophrenia to Sass in two meaningful ways: First, each of these seven characteristics can manifest in numerous ways; second, they all demonstrate a tendency toward the extreme, which, at the extreme, destroys the possibility for shared meaning.

**Alienation in modernism.** The second similarity between schizophrenia and modernism, according to Sass, is the inward turn required to see the world anew. The process of detachment from the world of shared meaning in favor of a heightened awareness and idiosyncratic representation is central to the artist. Of Beckett, Musil, Rilke, and Hofmannsthal, Sass writes:
Like the schizophrenic in the *Stimmung*, all of these central modernist writers describe objects that seem alien and incomprehensible—stripped familiarity and reality, and of any sense of coherence or connectedness, yet bursting with some profound inner significance that always lies just beyond the reach of one’s comprehension (Sass, 1992, p. 58).

The loss of unity, the self’s inability to express adequate agency of efficacy of action, a sense of groundlessness and detachment from external reality, the smashing of conventional devices of temporal and narrative form – these are but some of the characteristics that modernism and its works of creative expression share with schizophrenia. The works of art described by Sass aim to reimagine, decenter, and replace the individual’s internal experience as the only source of truth, and one that itself will be questioned.

**Reflexivity in modernism.** Works of modernism demonstrate an adversarial stance (avant-gardism) that aims to defy or break down conventional notions of meaning, while recognizing that any position taken can and will then be subject to critique by other perspectives. That means that no one can be the de facto expert on anything, even the creator, as a multiplicity of perspectives is universally accepted while the authenticity of intention itself is called into question (in the case of postmodern modes of thinking).

Sass seeks to understand this evolution in thinking by examining the development of Western culture over the past two centuries. From romanticism to modernism and postmodernism, the predominant trend he observes is one of a grappling with acceptance of this reflexivity. Romantics, he reports, pushed for unity of body and mind, nature and nurture, trying to bridge the divide that was rapidly growing, perhaps to deny or mitigate the troubling changes afoot in modern life. Postromantic or modernist thinkers shifted tack, hoping to rectify the
encroaching feeling of meaninglessness and groundlessness vis-à-vis a call to action, advocating for reinsertion into the world of Being or Dasein (i.e., creating one’s sense of meaning through intentional engagement in the world). Postmodernists, on the other hand, reject these strategies outright and focus on embracing the inevitable lack of meaning. Sass suggests the postmodern approach is in-line with a schizoid mode of being that is perhaps the characterological consequence of living in a world subject to such “hyper” reflexivity. Of this tendency toward a schizoid mode of being Sass writes:

We might regard the artist as an emblematic as well as ambivalent figure—his inward turn providing an image of nonconformist escape or of rebellion against modern society while at the same time illustrating, in exaggerated form, tendencies that pervade the same society (p. 82, emphasis in original).

How then does Sass differentiate between artist and patient, culture and illness? The central difference that Sass observes lies in the issue of agency. While the artist induces a state of detachment and unreality through his or her work product, even making use of such a state during the creative process, it is done with a certain amount of willfulness and control that is lacking in the schizophrenic patient. Furthermore, it is assumed that the artist can take part in shared meaning and communal experiences of reality (i.e., Dasein) that the schizophrenic individual cannot. Of course, as mentioned above, Sass believes that many schizophrenic patients do possess an ability for comprehension and action that is far more complex than the binary distinction I am suggesting here. Furthermore, it is clear to Sass that the line between art and madness is also drawn thin at times. That is not to say, either, that all artists are mad (or even a little bit), though some (e.g., Van Gough) clearly were. Rather, perhaps the most appropriate
way to think about this is that madness and creativity exist sometimes as reflections of the other, but on a spectrum of agency whereby the ability to direct one’s consciousness and shift between the internal and external world remains sometimes more and sometimes less intact.

**The role of trauma.** I would now like to impose some of my own thoughts on the issue of madness, especially as it relates to schizophrenia and modern culture. The schizophrenic patient is helpless to direct or titrate his or her attention and experience of consciousness, likely (in my opinion) because a trauma of some nature has impinged upon the mind’s ability to make meaning of the experience or process information in a way that can be productively assimilated into the individual’s personal narrative. They are similarly helpless to repress or sublimate because trauma forces continual awareness, hyperawareness even, as it is transformed into disguised (i.e., bizarre) form. Like living in a dream. As Sass (and Bass) suggest – denial and/or transformation requires a certain recognition of reality, however unconscious.

My reading of Sass and clinical experience working on an inpatient unit with a variety of psychiatric illnesses during internship have given me compelling (if not anecdotal) reasons to believe that the issue of trauma is particularly salient when trying to understand the line between artful reflection in an arguably insane world, and insanity itself. Like Sass, I fully support the medical model’s assumption of neurological deficits and biological predispositions to certain psychiatric illnesses. However, the biopsychosocial markers of any individual case must be examined in full. Trauma – be it emotional, relational, or concrete (e.g., poverty, physical/sexual violence, natural disaster) seems to be a highly correlated factor with the development of severe and persistent mental illness. Of course, many individuals who have grown up in environments of poverty and had experiences of neglect and abuse do not develop symptoms of psychosis, that
is in fact the norm. Moreover, there are some individuals who develop psychotic illness much later in life; sometimes not until their seventies (I had one such patient). I also believe that the loss of self or the insufficient development of a stable sense of self can be experienced as traumatic, especially in the context of other forms of overt trauma.

Perhaps the most fruitful exploration would be along the nexus of trauma, resilience, and biology. Given the constraints of time, space, and the argument at hand, I would like to suggest that trauma plays a defining role in the etiology of madness, but that trauma as it is experienced by individuals varies greatly in its effects. Like Sass, I cannot purport to provide any new insight into the etiology of such a complex illness. However, also like Sass, my belief is that the general conditions of Western society in the past few centuries have given way to a situation in which the ability to repress existential terror, to defend against its ominous call to nothingness, has become increasingly difficult as the defenses against it have been eroded over time. Schizophrenia is, perhaps, among other things, a crisis of the self and the environment at once – a failure of the self to develop a robustness necessary to flourish in today’s world, and an environment that fails to provide containment from external pressures such as the psychopathology of the individuals and systems surrounding the patient. In a world that demands a stable sense of self that is also flexible to changing conditions, what do we do when that sense of self is not available to us? I believe this question plagues individuals and modern culture alike.

**Conclusion.** In this chapter, Freud described the elegant solution of religion to the problem of existential terror and Rieff illustrated how the loss of religion and communal living in Western society marked a fundamental paradigm shift in culture. My review of Giddens, Strenger, and Sass has further pointed out the ways in which the reflexivity that has come to characterize modernity can engender a loss of ontological security when the social milieu is
increasingly abstract, in flux, and the project of the self requires significant effort by the individual to give it shape and meaning. Through his descriptive account of modern culture and the inner world of schizophrenic patients, Sass provided texture to the notion of what it means to live in a world in which repression of existential terror is thinly veiled. Further, Sass has highlighted how the incompatible alternatives of modern thought—extreme detachment and hyper reflexivity—represent a paradox that does not leave any clear path toward solution or integration with other aspects of social change that might provide new modes of being or sources of defense to combat existential terror. In the following chapter, I would like to address the concept of trauma as a major consequence of the shifts in culture described in this chapter.

Chapter Three: Traumatic Impact of Erosion of Cultural Defense against Existential Terror

If transference-based authority—parental, religious, or political—protects us from excessive anxiety regarding our mortality and a host of other human vulnerabilities, what happens when the defensive function of the authority system becomes so amorphous and largely indefensible that it ceases to serve this function effectively? The goal of this next section is to address the traumatic impact that the shift in culture described above has had on the Western psyche. We will do this by returning to our earlier discussion of existential philosophy and its intersection with emotional trauma as described by Stolorow (2011), followed by a detailed inquiry into the cognitive process by which emotional trauma impacts the individual and society in Terror Management Theory. Finally, we will examine the cumulative impact of centuries of cultural change from the perspective of Elizabeth Young-Bruehl (2012), and the rise of tyranny in the 20th century as a possible response to this trauma (and a trauma-inducing phenomenon itself) as described by Mark Edmundson (2007).
Emotional trauma and existential terror. Merging our earlier discussion of existential philosophy with the psychological impact of existential terror, Stolorow (2011) argues in *World, Affectivity, Trauma: Heidegger and Post-Cartesian Psychoanalysis* that emotional trauma (e.g., loss of loved one), is akin to Heidegger’s description of existential anxiety in that it involves “plunging the traumatized person into a form of authentic Being-toward-death” (p. 42). If we recall from the first chapter, Heidegger views anxiety (or angst) as a feeling-state that jolts us back into awareness of reality as Beings-in-the-world. Anxiety takes us out of everyday concerns, of being part of the “they,” and confronts us with the need to shape our existence as independent agents, unfettered by the demands or norms of our social world. Stolorow expands upon this idea by suggesting that “absorption in the everyday practical world serves as defensive evasion of authentic Being-toward-death” (p. 41) – where Being-toward-death “annihilates any actualizable potentiality-for-Being that might stably anchor everyday significance” (p. 41). In other words, not only does immersion in the “they” inhibit authentic living, it is designed to do just that for the sake of keeping awareness of existential concerns from consciousness. Sass’ description of the schizophrenic patient in the previous chapter bears remarkable resemblance to the point Stolorow makes here, which is that contact with existential terror makes it impossible to maintain the guise of everyday living and that events which constitutes emotional traumas can trigger this in any individual. When absorbed with the everyday we do not think about death; quite the opposite, we derive security through our perceived necessity of daily routine and living in accordance with our social environment. Being-toward-death is a state of mind in which the meaninglessness of our quotidian preoccupations becomes conscious:

Trauma shatters the absolutisms of everyday life, which, like the illusions of the “they,” evade and cover up the finitude, contingency, and embeddedness of our
existence and the indefiniteness of its certain extinction. Such shattering exposes what has been heretofore concealed, thereby plunging the traumatized person, in Heidegger’s terms, into a form of authentic Being-toward-death and into the anxiety—the loss of significance, the uncanniness—through which authentic Being-toward-death is disclosed. Trauma, like authentic Being-toward-death, individuates us, but in a manner that manifests in an excruciating sense of singularity and solitude. (Stolorow, 2011, p. 44)

Emotional trauma, then, results when a spontaneous intrusion of this awareness enters consciousness. It is traumatic because the ontological security that absorption with the “they” provides is wrenched from the individual without warning. Stolorow contributes to our understanding of this existential terror in the following way: beyond its potential for individuation and authenticity emphasized by Heidegger, it poses a potential trauma response because of the intense and painful isolation it evokes. According to Stolorow, the degree to which something is experienced as traumatic depends on the “context of an affect-integrating relational home” (p. 50) in which disrupting experience can be processed and thus experienced as less overwhelming. He writes: “Authentic existing presupposed a capacity to dwell in the emotional pain (e.g., the existential anxiety) that accompanies a non-evasive recognition of finitude, and this capacity, in turn, requires that such pain find a relational context in which it can be held” (2011, p. 50). While Stolorow does not provide an explicit definition of his term relational home, I assume that he is referring to the network of human relationships that mollify one’s sense of isolation through engagement in empathic comprehension of one’s experience (much in the same way an analyst aims to engage with his or her patient), or, adherence to doctrines (e.g., religious faith) that provide a solution to the realities of death and nonexistence.
To this, I would add the holding function of culture, which, if sufficiently robust, is an effective conductor of ontological security as a carrier of the symbolic self. In the next section, we will examine what happens when this buffer against existential anxiety is threatened at the level of the individual and society.

To summarize, Stolorow suggests that emotional trauma has the potential to erode ontological security and place us in direct contact with overwhelming existential terror because it jolts us out of the repression associated with everyday life and forces us into awareness of our finitude. The potential to experience this as traumatic depends in large part on the affect-regulating relationships, pursuits, or beliefs that one has to ameliorate the effects of such emotional dislocations. Stolorow’s description of emotional trauma gives us further cause to contemplate how the lack of affect-integrating buffers (what we might consider variations of the defense against existential terror) affects not only the individual when one is not sufficiently embedded in such social relationships, but how society is affected by the waning, gradual or abrupt, of culturally appropriate affect-integrating buffers.

**What happens to individuals and society when the cultural defense against existential terror is challenged?**

In the first chapter, we reviewed literature supporting the TMT hypothesis that cultural worldviews provide a meaningful source of self-esteem that act as a buffer against existential terror. In this section, we will look more closely at this domain of TMT to understand what happens to the individual when the mechanism of cultural defense is threatened and/or traumatically breached. To do this, we will revisit the temporal processes by which defense against existential terror operates and highlight the mechanics of the defensive process in detail, the effects of traumatic experience on an individual’s ability to maintain an adequate defense
against death awareness, and the methods for coping with intolerable anxiety when the normal defenses are rendered ineffective.

**Existential terror is primarily experienced at an unconscious level.** TMT researchers have determined that “worldview defense following mortality salience can only occur to the extent that people are not consciously thinking about death” (p. 218, Arndt, Goldenberg, Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2000). Recalling the dual defense model described earlier in chapter one, TMT describes a temporal cognitive process of defense against existential terror that begins with proximal defenses (i.e., deliberate, conscious attempts to deny death awareness) in response to explicit reminders of death; which, when they begin to fade, are replaced by distal defenses (i.e., unintentional reinforcement of self-esteem and/or symbolic/cultural worldviews) to manage the unconscious resurgence of death awareness that arises when death thoughts are no longer in the individual’s conscious mind, yet remain highly accessible (see figure below for visual for representation).
In other words, when faced with conscious thoughts of death, an individual’s first response is to actively expel such thoughts from conscious awareness or diminish their frightening effect by utilizing strategies of distraction, denial, or crafting logical arguments to relocate the problem of death into the future. Successful concretization and/or dismissal of the threat reassures the individual that worrying about death is not necessary in the present moment, thereby minimizing death-thought accessibility. However, TMT research demonstrates that arousal of thoughts explicitly related to death triggers conscious and unconscious concerns regarding death (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Brues, 1994). So, although proximal defenses are generally effective at ameliorating conscious awareness of death, concerns regarding death linger in the unconscious with high levels of accessibility. If the individual is not impeded in his or her efforts to “forget” (e.g., by being continuously reminded of the death
related thoughts), TMT research has shown that he or she will evoke a symbolic/cultural worldview defense to counteract the impact of these unconscious thoughts. The upshot of this process is that “reminders of mortality are most likely to produce their effects in precisely those situations in which one is least aware of their impact” (p. 636, Greenberg et al., 1994).

**Anxiety buffer disruption theory.** As described above, an individual’s response to ordinary life situations that raise conscious awareness of mortality can be anticipated using the temporal cognitive process described by TMT research in which anxiety regarding existential terror is buffered by proximal and distal defenses that ultimately lead to reinforcement of cultural worldviews. Anxiety buffer disruption theory (ABDT; Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2011) extends TMT by examining the role traumatic life events have on the anxiety-buffer apparatus (which they expand to include close personal relationships in addition to cultural worldviews and self-esteem).

ABDT posits that traumatic events disrupt the normal functioning of the anxiety-buffer system, potentially putting one in direct contact with overwhelming anxiety regarding death. A disruption in the anxiety-buffer system challenges an individual’s worldview defense, which, depending on the level of traumatic disruption, can lead to a temporary destabilization or absolute collapse of the symbolic defense. In cases of mild to moderate trauma, threats to one’s worldview are destabilized temporarily; to prevent total collapse of the defense an individual will “double down” on his or her existing worldviews and symbolic sources of self-esteem to reinstate psychological equanimity in the face of traumatic disruption. Severe trauma, however, leads to a complete breakdown in the symbolic (distal) worldview defense and is more likely to have long-term effects on psychological wellbeing: “This collapse might be associated with a realization, on either an implicit or explicit level, that nothing – not faith in one’s worldview, not
self-esteem, not close relationships – could effectively protect one from vulnerability and mortality” (Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2011, p. 7). In other words, mild or moderate levels of trauma do not cause an individual to reevaluate his or her conception of reality in the same way that severe trauma does.

**PTSD: effects of moderate and severe trauma on the anxiety-buffering system.**

Pyszczynski and Kesebir (2011) provide empirical support for ABDT utilizing a series of studies conducted to test the anxiety-buffer model described above as it applies to PTSD. The authors conceptualize PTSD as a clinical outcome of an anxiety-buffer system that has been compromised by trauma, exposing the individual to intolerable existential anxiety that manifests in the symptoms described by the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Although defenselessness against existential terror is the basic premise of ABDT, Pyszczynski and Kesebir (2011) acknowledge that a myriad of neurological, physical, and emotional factors are involved in PTSD including, but not limited to, a perceived threat to one’s life. Their work examines the impact of various types of trauma that span four geographically, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse populations: survivors of the 2005 Zarand earthquake in Iran, female survivors of domestic violence in Poland, survivors of civil war in Cote d’Ivoire, and American college students exposed to trauma.

Among the major findings of these studies was the important role of peritraumatic dissociation in subsequent development of PTSD (this finding is corroborated by many independent, nonrelated studies on PTSD that validate the moderating effect of peritraumatic dissociation in relation to PTSD). The results of these studies indicate that individuals who scored high on measures of dissociation experienced failure of proximal (e.g., suppression) and distal (i.e., symbolic, worldview) defenses, whereas individuals with low scores (lower levels of
dissociation) demonstrated intact proximal defenses and displayed enhanced worldview (distal) defense. In addition, those for whom the disruption of the anxiety-buffer system was greatest (as measured by high levels of dissociation and severity of PTSD symptoms) reported the highest frequency and severity of clinical symptoms.

The research findings are consistent with the theory; individuals who experience mild-to-moderate levels of distress (i.e., demonstrated by low levels of dissociation and/or symptomatology) can successfully engage proximal defenses to ward off conscious recognition of vulnerability and manage the effects on unconscious awareness through intensification of their cultural worldview. Severe levels of trauma, however, lead to a total collapse in proximal and distal defenses. In these cases, individuals are unable to recover through reinforcement of an established worldview defense. Left defenseless, they are overwhelmed by anxiety, which would account for the higher levels of symptom severity. Another finding, which speaks perhaps to the elements of subjective experience, resilience, and Stolorow’s (2011) idea of a relational home, are the differences in how individuals respond to the same instances of trauma. Pyszczynski and Kesebir (2011) report that the same instance of trauma can vary in terms of the degree of disruption to their anxiety-buffer system.

**Severe trauma and cultural breakdown.** In a similar vein, TMT researchers (Salzman, 2001; Salzman & Halloran, 2004) set out to understand what happens when cultural trauma deprives individuals of important buffers against existential anxiety. Utilizing qualitative methods, they reviewed the impact of colonialism on three genetically distinct and geographically disperse groups of indigenous peoples: The Native Yup’ik (Eskimo) of Alaska, Native Hawaiians, and Aboriginal Australians. In all three cases, European conquerors devastated the native populations with disease and violent military action. Those who survived
the initial onslaught were subsequently disenfranchised in all realms of life: economically, politically, and in terms of maintaining their spiritual beliefs and cultural practices. These groups developed high risk for significant impairments in physical health and psychological wellbeing; high rates of cancer deaths, diabetes, obesity, infant mortality, congenital diseases, suicide, alcoholism and substance abuse, accidental death, incarceration, child abuse, and severe psychological disorders were reported among these groups. Salzman and Halloran (2004) suggest that the relative frequency and severity of these bio-psycho-social outcomes can be attributed to the devastating effects of severe cultural trauma:

The cultural destruction and trauma experienced by First Nation indigenous peoples has undermined their basis of existential meaning and value to the extent that they have little protection from basic human anxiety, which has become manifest in the extent and prevalence of the psychological ill health and poor well-being they suffer. (p. 236)

The narrative of Harold Napoleon, whose work was employed by Salzman and Halloran (2004) offers a qualitative illustration of the cultural trauma rendered upon the Yup’ik people of Alaska. In *Yuuyaraq: The way of the human being*, Napoleon (1996) provides a retrospective account of the loss of traditional Yup’ik culture:

Their medicines and their medicine men and women had proven useless. Everything they had believed in had failed. Their ancient world had collapsed . . .

The world the survivors woke to was without anchor. They woke up in shock, listless, confused, bewildered, heartbroken, and afraid. (Napoleon, 1996, p. 11)

This brief statement conveys the profound sense of helplessness and vulnerability that arises in the face of complete failure of the worldview defense. The initial loss of life, while
undeniably painful, seems to have been less consequential than the loss of cultural meaning.

Similar to the findings of Pyszczynski and Kesebir (2011) in relation to disruptions in the anxiety-buffer system and PTSD, this study suggests that exposure to extreme vulnerability (in this case by means of violent assault) can lead to a devastating loss of meaning, leaving members of the decimated culture prone to debilitating physical and mental illness outcomes.

Salzman and Halloran (2004) tried to make sense of what has the potential to be reparative in the situation faced by the indigenous peoples they studied. One option, which the authors advocate as being an optimal source of renewal, is to revive the “ontological prescriptions” (p. 236) of the traditional culture and integrate them into the fabric of daily life to reconstruct the cultural buffer against existential anxiety. The second is to adopt a new worldview consistent with the (newly) dominant culture. There are, of course, difficulties with both options. First, conquered and/or persecuted peoples are commonly forbidden from actively practicing their religious and cultural heritage, often by threat of discrimination, severe punishment or death. Second, in the face of severe traumatic disruption, one’s cultural heritage may cease to offer a compelling worldview that is believable following such absolute destruction in meaning (as illustrated in the case of Yup’ik culture). Another difficulty inherent in this second option—embracing or “joining” the dominant culture—is that conquered and persecuted peoples are often barred from meaningful engagement with the dominant culture by systematic discrimination and marginalization by the newcomers. These difficulties are summarized below:

For many indigenous people, the Western worldview, while overwhelming, was never compelling enough to attract the faith required to establish an adequate cultural anxiety buffer. For others, the overwhelming power of the colonizers may have made its worldview compelling, but racism and other structural barriers
made the achievement of its standards extremely difficult. The result in both cases is anxiety. (Salzman & Halloran, 2004, pp. 236-237)

As we have seen with Becker, the strength of a cultural hero system or transference paradigm lies in its believability; to be effective, the story one tells oneself to reconstitute old ways of being or forge new a new identity must be convincing, not simply convenient or nostalgic. As Salzman and Halloran (2004) aptly point out, the discrimination indigenous peoples faced in the wake of colonization made it difficult to adopt new cultural transference paradigms because believability requires a certain amount of self-deception to work; a worldview that promotes active oppression of a particular group can be impossible to embrace, or, alternatively, can only be incorporated at the cost of an injurious loss of authenticity, which does not bode well for building a sustainable worldview defense.

A third and perhaps more uplifting alternative for surviving cultural devastation is proposed by Jonathan Lear (1969) in his compelling account of the survival of the Crow Nation following their cooperation with the United States government in the mid-1800s. In his *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Lear investigates the “ontological vulnerability” (p. 50) shared by all human beings; namely, that at any time, the concepts that give meaning to our lives and thereby motivate our actions and strivings in the world, are at risk; a kind of existential tension that underlies our attempts to make meaning of the world and our place in it. His goal is to understand the psychological transformation or flexibility required to respond courageously in the face of cultural collapse. Lear defines cultural collapse broadly as a situation in which there is “no conception of the good life to provide a larger context for the significance of one’s acts” (p. 57) and courage as “the ability to face up to reality, to exercise good judgment, and to tolerate danger in doing so” (Lear, 1969, p. 133).
After the buffalo were gone and the Crow could no longer maintain their nomadic life due to confinement to the reservation, and war with rival tribes was forbidden, all the things that gave life meaning to the Crow vanished. Combined with the brutal treatment by the United States government that resulted in massive loss of life and meager living conditions, it does not take much in the way of empathic identification to contemplate a response in which one either gives up hope (submits to despair) or maintains a rudimentary existence. Lear’s investigation is focused on the way in which the Crow’s leader, Plenty Coups, responded to the annihilation of his peoples’ way of life:

Plenty Coups responded to the collapse of his civilization with radical hope. What makes this hope radical is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it. (1969, p. 103, emphasis in original)

Radical hope is not faith because faith is a belief predicated on a concept, such as the existence of god or a higher power, which ceases to have meaning in the circumstance we are describing. Radical hope is the ability to maintain an optimistic perspective while staying attuned to the reality of the traumatic loss as it is unfolding. For this alternative to bear fruit, Lear makes clear that the loss incurred must be recognized and metabolized. This I believe is where the kernel of courage lies, in allowing oneself to bear the weight of such profound loss while finding a way to move forward with an attitude of optimism that has no concrete aim.

Lear contrasts Plenty Coups approach of radical hope with the ostensibly more pragmatic one taken by a rival tribe’s leader, Sitting Bull. Chief of the Crow’s mortal enemy, the Sioux, Sitting Bull famously resisted the United States government for decades to maintain the
authenticity of the Sioux way of life. In the end, Lear suggests that the outcome for the Sioux – a brutal defeat that stripped them of their land – was suboptimal in that fewer material (e.g., land) and psychological resources were available for the Sioux to navigate the future and flourish as a culture again (albeit in modified form). Rather than recognizing the futility of resistance in the face of a technologically superior opponent, Lear asserts that Sitting Bull turned away from reality, choosing to focus on symbolic rituals (i.e., Ghost Dance), the significance of which had already been rendered ineffectual given the military and political dominance of the American settlers. Sitting Bull allowed the dance to continue even though its meaning had already been lost.

What makes Plenty Coups’ approach courageous is that it allowed him to avoid despair by responding well to the new reality his people faced. In other words, Plenty Coups did not bury his head in the sand. Instead, Plenty Coups found a way to recalibrate the notion of what it meant to be a Crow in the context of a reality that he could not have envisioned for himself or his people. According to Lear, Plenty Coups’ courage derived from his ability to utilize existing Crow tradition, specifically his adaptation of the notion of wisdom in the form of the ‘Chickadee-person’—someone devoted to continuously developing his mind and learning how to succeed by paying close attention to the experiences of others—in ways that would benefit his tribe in the changing landscape. Recognition of his people’s defeat allowed Plenty Coups to negotiate and renegotiate treaties with the U.S. government and encourage future generations of Crow to develop their minds by incorporating formal education in the European tradition so that future generations of Crow would be able to flourish in the new reality and minimize further oppression.
Obviously, the Crow’s survival of cultural destruction was not a happy affair. Serious damage was done, the effects of which are undoubtedly still felt in their community. What stands out about Lear’s notion of radical hope is its inherently optimistic perspective that suggests survival is possible if one is psychologically adroit enough to endure the cultural transformation of ideals. Lear claims that this kind of agency has roots in early experience:

We instinctively reach out to parental figures for emotional and nutritional sustenance that, in the moment, we lack the resources to understand. This is the archaic prototype of radical hope: in infancy we are reaching out for sustenance from a source of goodness even though we as yet lack the concepts with which to understand what we are reaching out for. (Lear, 1969, p. 122)

Although Lear recognizes the potential for despair that is a natural response when one is confronted with the destruction of meaning, he makes the point that the very young infant, as of yet unable to grasp the notion of symbolic meaning, reaches out to its caregivers with the expectation of receiving something good, something that will nurture and sustain it. Lear suggests that part of this goodness includes an introduction into the symbolic world of meaning:

Part of the sustenance our parenting figures will give us is the concepts with which we can at least begin to understand what we are longing for. This is a crucial aspect of acquiring a natural language: inheriting a culture’s set of concepts through which we can understand ourselves as desiring, wishing, and hoping for certain things. It is because of our finite, erotic natures that we come to conceive of ourselves as finite erotic creatures. (Lear, 1969, pp. 122-123)

Whereas Becker’s interpretation of the symbolic emphasizes its defensive function (against the fear of annihilation of being), Lear’s highlights the inherently life-affirming aspect
of culture’s symbols and their necessity for assimilating our meaning-making nature. Per Lear, “the emphasis here is not on some mysterious source of goodness, but on the limited nature of our finite conceptual resources” (1969, pp. 121-122). In other words, just because we do not possess a satisfactory conceptual paradigm for making sense of a new situation does not mean that one will not present itself, just as the old one may have unexpectedly crumbled or showed itself to be insufficient in some way.

Conclusion. As Stolorow (2011) suggests, the impact of overwhelming and emotionally traumatic experience exists on a continuum. ABDT (2011) explains how this continuum works at the level of the individual, with its mild to severe disruption in the anxiety-buffering system, while Salzman and Halloran (2004) illustrate the catastrophic impact that severe disruptions in culture can have on entire groups of people and Lear (1969) shows that psychological adaptation to cultural devastation in the form of radical hope is possible as an alternative to despair. In the next section, I would like to examine this spectrum of trauma at the level of society; that is, I would like to explore the idea that the erosion of the cultural worldview of religion in the face of modern developments and reflexivity was experienced as a trauma at both ends of the spectrum: as a gradual but nonetheless significant series of micro traumas, that, due to culture’s inability to construct a meaningful and affect-regulating narrative to make meaning of the transition, developed into a tension that ultimately found expression through a series of catastrophic traumas that have decimated generations of individuals through war and cyclical geopolitical conflict.

Cumulative social trauma. My argument in this section is that our gradual (but dramatic) ability to manipulate nature, expressed through myriad economic, political, scientific, technological and social changes that define early modernity, represents not only a series of
tremendous achievements but a social cumulative trauma which slowly weakened any sustainable cultural worldview defense against existential terror.

In a posthumously published paper, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl (2012) draws parallels between the development of individuals and society in what she calls the microcosm-macrocosm trend, a cycle of incremental evolution and growth that individuals and society (as elements of nature) are bound up in the service of eudaimonia, an Aristotelian notion of human flourishing. Hers is a distinctly positive perspective regarding the development of humankind, which, in many ways, serves as an interesting and even stark counterpoint to the views of existential philosophy, which negates absolute systems and efforts to order the chaos, as well as Freud’s notion of the death instinct and its attendant focus on the aggressive tendencies of civilization. Young-Bruehl’s adaptation of Masud Khan’s (1963) concept of cumulative trauma—itself a synthesis of Freud’s (1920) concept of the ‘protective shield’ and Winnicott’s (1952a) notion of the good-enough holding environment—contributes to our understanding of the role social institutions play as a protective barrier against existential concerns. Young-Bruehl defines the protective shield of society as “a relational network of people and institutions that grows up to enwrap basic social units—like families, but also states—in customs, programs, and ideas of eudaimonia that prevent the units’ failure and remedy their ills medically and psychotherapeutically” (2012, p. 550)

According to Khan (1963), cumulative trauma is the result of slight but frequent impingements on the anaclitic (dependency) needs of the infant, which as occasional occurrences would be harmless, but that over time - in their repetitive sum - constitute a trauma. Central to the notion of cumulative trauma is the mother’s role as a protective shield: The mother provides auxiliary ego-support for the child and protects it from internal and external overstimulation by
managing its physical environment and comfort and protecting the infant from “the mother’s subjective and unconscious love and hate, and thus allows her empathy to be maximally receptive to the infant’s needs” (Khan, 1963, p. 48). When the mother performs the protective shield function successfully, she helps the child reach ego maturity in a developmentally appropriate fashion. Cumulative trauma results from the strain of ongoing breaches in the protective shield function the mother provides:

It is only when these failures of the mother as protective shield are significantly frequent and have the rhythm of a pattern, and lead to impingements on the infant’s psych-soma, impingements which he has no means of eliminating, that they set up a nucleus of pathogenic reactions. (Khan, 1963, p. 48)

Khan points out that this process is qualitatively and quantitatively different from other (potentially more catastrophic) forms of trauma such as loss or separation from the mother, intrusion of her acute psychopathology (break-in) into the mind of the child, or trauma that occurs due to some uncontrollable factor related to the infant’s constitution such as debilitating illness. These forms of trauma are akin to the severe forms of trauma discussed earlier, that are more likely to overwhelm the individual with anxiety, whereas cumulative trauma represents a process rather than an event, of gradual and incremental chipping away at a protective agent, in this case, the mother’s auxiliary ego function as a protective shield. Another defining characteristic of cumulative trauma is that it can only be identified in hindsight, typically during the clinical encounter when the analyst observes a “bias in ego and psychosexual development” (Khan, 1963, p. 57, emphasis in original) that has shaped the adult personality.

Adopting Khan’s theory to understand the role of society in protecting the individual, Young-Bruehl (2012) writes:
A society provides the individuals who constitute it with a protective shield or shields, and there are traumas that breach these shields of existential belonging and social care or service and political union. A social shield can be broken through in many ways and degrees that are analogous to traumas of rupture, of break-in, and—perhaps the most common—of cumulative social erosion and deterioration and failure over time (p. 552).

Young-Bruehl’s adaptation of cumulative trauma to society is meant to provide support for her view that “humankind has been united in and by common terror, shared traumatization” (2012, p. 545) of the mass violence and genocide unleashed during the first half of the 20th century. She attributes the advances in modern technologies of transportation, communication and modes of warfare as laying the groundwork for the break-in (catastrophic) trauma of the Second World War. She argues:

The profound—unprecedented—rupture and break-in trauma cluster of the Second World War became a cumulative trauma as the generation suffering it transmitted it to their children, and as the events it set in train continued to traumatize both the adults and their children and grandchildren—thereby setting off more traumatic events (p. 552).

Young-Bruehl understands the wars and emergence of terrorism in the mid-20th–early 21st centuries (e.g., Vietnam, 9/11) as a compulsive repetition as survivors of the WWII generation transmitted the trauma and suffering they endured to the next generation (and then the next, and so on) by the defensive mechanism of identification with the aggressor.

Young-Bruehl’s insight regarding cumulative social trauma is well placed in the sense that it frames our thinking about how the cultural worldview defense of religion can be likened to
a protective shield, much in the same way TMT describes the distal defense function of cultural worldviews in the anxiety-buffer system. My position differs from hers in that I locate the cumulative social trauma in the centuries leading up to the 20th century, in which gradual but repeated strain was placed on the primary cultural defense against existential terror (e.g., religion, communal life), ultimately leading to its rather catastrophic collapse (i.e., break-in trauma) in the first half of the 20th century, shaking the bedrock of pre-modern versions of ontological security to their core (on this I am in agreement with Young-Bruehl).

Young-Bruehl is correct in the sense that what has transpired since the Second World War can be seen as a collective retraumatization from one generation to the next. However, this fails to account for the formative cultural antecedents that inspired the catastrophic trauma she describes. I think a stronger argument can be made by acknowledging the psychological distress that accompanied centuries of cultural flux as central to the erosion of ontological security in the shift from traditional society to modernity, which was eventually lived out as a series of catastrophic traumas when the reflexivity of modernity (as described by Giddens, 1990, 1991) came to bear its fullest force upon the world, most notably during the First and Second World Wars.

**Tyranny as a response to ontological insecurity.** With greater insight into the insidious effects of cumulative social trauma on the Western psyche in recent centuries we can begin to examine what happens when individuals and society repeatedly fail in their efforts to find relief from existential anxiety. The project of the self is, if not by design than by default, the only new paradigm of meaning that has come about in past centuries to replace religion and communal life. At this time, however, the self as a paradigm of cultural defense against existential terror is not sufficiently robust to shoulder the task. It remains unclear whether the failure of the self as a
paradigm of defense is best attributed to its nascent stage of development (religion had thousands of years after all to develop, and did so in the crucible of prolonged periods of violence), an inherent inadequacy, or, is simply doomed to fail (per the existential view). The effects of this failure, however, are painfully present in the turmoil of past decades and centuries. In this section, we will contemplate the rise in totalitarian regimes in the 20th century from the perspective of culture’s response to the erosion of ontological security in the modern era.

In his book *The Death of Sigmund Freud*, Mark Edmundson (2007) chronicles Freud’s interest in the problem of authority and the parallel rise of National Socialism in Germany that eventually forced Freud and his family to flee Austria. According to Edmundson, after decades exploring the unconscious dynamics of desire, Freud “hit upon a fundamental difficulty in human life: the problem of authority” (2007, p. 54) in 1914 and spent the next 25 years writing about the human need to submit to a greater power, especially in the form of tyranny. In Edmundson’s interpretation of Freud, his earlier works that focused on the unconscious (including his case studies) demonstrated an optimism that insight could lead to a reduction in neurotic psychological distress, but over time this view gave way to a darker, less optimistic perspective on the human condition that Freud begins to explore in his question regarding authority, and most concretely, his proposal of the death instinct.

The question of authority is posed utilizing Freud’s structural theory of a psyche in which its three components (id, ego, and super-ego) are in perpetual conflict. The super-ego acts as the agent of authority and becomes unduly harsh toward the ego when id impulses press for discharge (in real or imagined form). The result, as Edmundson points out, is psychic tension, and ultimately, emotional pain. To dull the pain, individuals seek intoxicants such as love and alcohol, which provide a modicum of relief by relaxing the super-ego’s harshness, however
temporarily, from the unpleasant and often unbearable pain of psychic conflict. Leaders, then, also function as a kind of intoxicant in that they provide relief, but do so by co-opting the individual’s super-ego. An absolute leader, like Hitler (or Stalin, or Pol Pot, or Mao Zedong), provides a super-ego substitute that is at once decisive and permissive – the values he upholds are clear and the means for achieving them are equally transparent. The absolute leader eliminates difference and is associated with ideals of permanence: god, destiny, equality, absolute truth. Edmundson (2007) summarizes the characteristics of the absolute leader:

We want a strong man with a simple doctrine that accounts for our sufferings, identifies our enemies, focuses our energies, and lets us indulge our forbidden desires with the best of conscience. This sort of man, appearing at the right moment, mouthing the right deceptions, rams life full of meaning and gives us, more endurally than wine and even than love, a sense of being whole. Suddenly we are not at war within ourselves. The sense of anxiety departs and we feel free. (p. 103)

Edmundson notes that the absolute leader provides an illusion of oneness and gives individuals permission to discharge the tension related to psychic conflict.

For Freud, aggressive energy has two alternatives: it can be repressed, in which case it comes under the purview of the individual’s super-ego (causing tension); or, it can be discharged, which releases tension but causes destruction. Freud’s hope for humankind was to foster the development of an alternative to destruction that did not allow the super-ego to unduly punish the ego (i.e., sublimation) while embracing the notion that some amount of psychic tension is both unavoidable and in certain ways, desirable. However, as we saw earlier in our discussion of *Future of an Illusion*, Freud realized that at our core, we all seek internal peace, or
freedom from conflict, and will thus do what we can in pursuit of that goal. The upshot of this reality is that we are willing to submit to forms of authority that promise to organize our lives, to reduce tension, and allow us to feel connected to a power greater than ourselves.

Edmundson approaches Freud’s attention to the problem of authority from the perspective of modernity and the changing social/political climate of the early 20th century. From this perspective, the rise of Hitler, while reflecting the specific circumstances of Germany following her defeat in the First World War, is representative of a much deeper struggle over the advent of modern life and the psychological need for merger and containment of anxiety that resulted from the loss of stability when traditional modes of authority crumbled. Describing Hitler and the Nazis, Edmundson (2007) writes, “Their way was to bring the present under control through the triumph of one leader, one party, one race, and one nation. They insisted on oneness in a world that seemed to be flying apart into unmanageable fragments” (p. 42). While the introduction of liberal democracy provided many freedoms and benefits, Edmundson suggests it was also disorienting as it created fertile ground for dissenting perspectives and lack of order. For Edmundson, the 20th century was plagued by an uncertainty that created more anxiety and tension than most individuals could bear. This laid the groundwork for the rise of fascism in Europe and the subsequent revival of religious fundamentalism across the world:

From the Freudian perspective, authoritarian religion and authoritarian politics are two sides of one debased coin. They feed off each other, borrow techniques, modes of persuasion, iconography. They traffic in the same sorts of miracle, mystery, and authority. And they are the most plausible form of human destiny: they are where humanity will go without potent efforts of resistance. Freud’s work suggests that no one should ever think that fascism and fundamentalism are
gone and done with. There is no such thing as an eternal triumph over them. Because they are so integral to what it is to be human, no one should even think that humanity has defeated them once and for all. This was the error of the liberal nineteenth century. (Edmundson, 2007, pp. 240-241)

When the lack of order becomes too anxiety-provoking, as it undoubtedly did in the political and economic turmoil of the early 20th century, individuals became more willing to forgo personal liberty for the sake of security. Feeling that old ways of life and their attendant symbols of authority and security were on the verge of annihilation, individuals looked to absolute leaders who sanctioned the release of pent-up tension and aggression that could not be adequately repressed.

**Chapter Four: Psychoanalysis Fails to Provide Relief from Existential Terror**

In the preceding chapters, we have seen how advances in science and technology rapidly changed the social order of the Western world. In the final chapter, I would like the address the place of psychoanalysis in this cultural transition. Psychoanalysis, as Rieff pointed out, developed in response to the crisis of authority engendered by the rapid shifts in technology and society that define the last two centuries. Religious faith and communal forms of living ceased to function as adequate buffers against existential terror while the role of the individual and the project of the ‘self’ became increasingly prominent in the nineteenth century. Freud, having recognized how traditional forms of authority had become sickness-inducing to modern individuals, sought to emancipate his patients from the tyranny of oppressive symbols of authority. In its place, he offered psychoanalytic theories and praxis as a means of working through our need for authority so we could invest our energies in the world in a more satisfying way.
Following the “medicalization” of psychoanalysis in the mid-twentieth century in the United States, psychoanalysis was the primary treatment model available to mental health professionals and its practitioners enjoyed tremendous academic and material resources in addition to social prestige in professional circles and popular culture. However, in recent decades, the star of psychoanalysis has faded. No longer the gold standard of psychological treatment, psychoanalysis has been eschewed by the medical establishment in favor of biological psychiatry and the study of the brain. The institutional and social prestige that psychoanalysts (initially only medical doctors) once enjoyed dwindled with the shift to psychopharmacology and the inclusion of psychologists in psychoanalytic training institutes. Currently, psychoanalysis has become marginalized within American psychology despite its growing contribution to the evidence-based treatment literature and other forms of empirical research in the field, as well as its ability to attract creative thinkers who continue to revolutionize psychoanalytic theory in keeping with changes in contemporary culture. How do we make sense of this radical reversal of fortune?

Strenger (2015) suggests that psychoanalysis is not poised to make a comeback in the realm of academic psychiatry due to the entrenched nature of cognitive neuroscience in the university setting. However, he believes that psychoanalysis can reinvigorate its standing in the public domain by engaging with the “third culture”: a space where experts in their field connect directly with the public via articles in prominent newspapers, books written with a lay audience in mind, and various internet-based forums (e.g., TED talks) that allow ideas from the scientific and academic communities to reach a wider audience of educated lay individuals. Why does entree into this third culture matter for psychoanalysis?
Strenger argues that the globalized nature of our economic and social worlds challenges the notion of cultural superiority:

Cultures can only survive if the ontological status of its objects of belief and the source of its values is not questioned, whether these be prophets, saints, canonical works of art, or the rituals that hold a culture together. But this is becoming progressively more difficult when the reach of the global infotainment system intrudes everywhere, and even traditional forms of life realize that they are but specks within a global system immensely more powerful than any particular cultural form of life. (2015, p. 296)

In a world in which value has become a subjective matter, the only way to know who is truly ahead is to quantify that which matters to us. The “craze of quantification” (Strenger, 2015, p. 295) can be seen everywhere: Countries are ranked by the statistics of their GDP, debt levels, mortality rates, etc.; individuals by their wealth, celebrity and influence (determined by number of views, likes, comments on a feed, friends/followers, etc.). Strenger makes the point that the subjective experience of quality becomes meaningless when numbers dictate value, which is a potential problem when the value of the self is cast in these terms. Strenger sees considerable suffering implicit in the trend toward simplification and quantification of meaning (2015).

Human beings have not become any less complex than in previous periods, if anything, the barrage of social and economic demands we contend with and the myriad roles we play in life make our identities more complex than in previous eras.

According to Strenger (2015), the most important message psychoanalysis has to offer modern individuals is validation of their complexity. The self, he contends, is meaningful owing to its depth and complexity and should resist the push to one-dimensional form. His hope for
psychoanalysis is that it can find a way to participate in mainstream society (he advocates for inclusion in the third culture) so that it can communicate ideas that are desperately needed. Doing so will not only help to keep psychoanalysis relevant but allow it to do its ultimate job, which is to use its concepts to help people make sense of their experience of the world: “We should see reaching out to the wider culture as our duty, as an integral part of our professional ethos and mission—of deciphering human experience and alleviating suffering through understanding” (Strenger, 2015, p. 304). The validation of the self’s complexity as a valuable source of meaning is no small task in a world that pushes for simplification of meaning in the service of quantifying the value of an experience. Per Strenger, the message psychoanalysis has to deliver is as important today as ever, and in order to deliver its message psychoanalysis must find its way back into mainstream culture. To do so, psychoanalysts must learn to connect emotionally with an audience that has little or no background in psychoanalytic theory, and make a compelling case for their ideas by winning over hearts and minds in 18 minutes or less. Needless to say, this is not small task for anyone, let alone a tradition of people who stereotypically find themselves most comfortable behind the couch.

**Psychoanalysis fails**

Beyond the manifest reasons for the diminished status of psychoanalysis in academia and medicine, and its as-of-yet inability to integrate itself into current cultural milieu, psychoanalysis faces other challenges to its longevity. What do we mean when we say psychoanalysis fails? In my view, psychoanalysis fails at various levels. First, psychoanalysis fails because all systems of meaning are doomed to fail. Psychoanalysis cannot eradicate the anxiety inherent in living, and thus will always be limited, as all systems are, by its ability to turn diffuse anxiety about human vulnerability into a concrete problem that can be addressed. The paradox of modernity is that we
live in a cultural paradigm based on reflexivity that defies certainty yet demands the symbolic possibility of omnipotence at the same time to manage existential anxiety.

This leads to the second reason why psychoanalysis fails: it does not provide an effective enough buffer against existential terror. The premise of the “analytic attitude,” per Rieff, is that there is no one standing behind the analyst. In other words, psychoanalysis does not assume a role of omnipotence and thus leaves the individual, albeit with tools to manage life in a successful way, without the promise of authority. This is by design. Freud, having recognized how traditional forms of authority had become sickness-inducing to modern individuals, sought to emancipate his patients from the tyranny of oppressive symbols of authority. In its place, he offered psychoanalytic theories and praxis as a means of working through our need for authority so we could invest our energies in the world in a less stultifying way. Although Freud recognized that the need for authority stemmed from contact with vulnerability, he thought that with the right form of treatment people could rise above this need and assume a stance of “maturity.” What he failed to recognize, for reasons we will discuss shortly, is that even successful attainment of the mature attitude with respect to authority and successful investment in the world, while monumental achievements in their own right, do not extinguish the fundamental human need to feel connected to an external source of authority.

There is also the third issue of how difficult this stance of maturity is to achieve, both at a practical level and a psychological one. As clinicians know, there is no expedient route to psychological growth and maturity. It often requires prolonged periods of emotionally painful and monetarily draining effort. The “prize” for one’s hard-won “maturity” is not the fulfillment of one’s potential, or self-actualization, though these things are within the realm of possibility. If anything, psychoanalytic treatment might make these things possible, but it does not procure
them as a matter of course. In fact, one critique of the therapeutic persuasion that has grown out of psychoanalytic treatment is the idea that it creates sick individuals who search for a cure that will forever elude them, thus turning the therapeutic modality into a form of tail-chasing that generates more misery than it solves.

**Psychoanalysis is a system.** In his concise but robustly argued *Terrors and Experts* (1995), psychoanalyst Adam Phillips draws our attention to the human need for “experts” or authority figures to help manage the basic fears of existence. Like many authors we have reviewed thus far, Phillips suggests the need for experts derives from the infant’s earliest experience of helplessness, defined in terms of overwhelming and/or uncontrollable somatic sensation. He argues that the pain and suffering of this early experience ruptures the infant’s fantasy of self-sufficiency and prompts him or her to seek relief through contact with others—others who know something about the world and can protect him or her from recurrent pain. Thus, the instillation of one’s parents as the first figures of authority (vis-à-vis the child’s dependence) is achieved and becomes the prototype for all future objects of transference (Phillips notes with some irony the futility of such a project in light of the fact that adults are not in possession of superior knowledge regarding the grand mysteries of life but are nevertheless endowed with the power to decide what constitutes an explanation in relation to the child).

**Psychoanalysis and fear.** Following Freud, Becker, and others, Phillips asserts that the second fear to arise in early childhood is the fear of loss of the parents, which is compounded by the issues dependency engenders, including the fear of loss of the caregiver’s attention (i.e., abandonment), fear of misrecognition of the infant’s needs (i.e., retraumatization), and the strong ambivalent feelings dependency inevitably evokes. The third fear that shapes human experience, according to Phillips, is the resultant tension of dependence and agency:
Fear is clearly linked in Freud’s writing with dependence, and the related question of agency; fear becomes both a recognition of its absence, and a relative limitation: our fantasies of autonomy are circumscribed by fear. But fear also initiates the child into the question of agency. The evolving question for the infant and child is: What capacity do I have to secure a future? (1995, p. 51)

Phillips asserts that all human beings suffer from fear; fear being the foundation of religion and neurosis. It should be noted that in accordance with our earlier discussion of Becker and Bass in chapter one, Phillips recognizes that the ego’s defensive structure (and by extension symptom formation) is established in response to this earliest fear and maintained for the very purpose of regulating fear associated with helplessness. In this light, our most primitive defenses are, as Bass iterated in his work, derived to protect us not only from the object of fear itself (the concretized form of infantile terror), but from awareness that the object of fear exists.

The developmental origins of fear, however, are not the focal point of Phillips’ discussion. He is primarily concerned with what human beings do with this fear vis-à-vis authority, and the implications this has for psychoanalysis. Fear, Phillips notes (in a vein similar to existential philosophy), is a fear of something; by concretizing an unpleasant experience that happened in the past, by making it something we can (potentially) know about, we can actively construct ways of protecting ourselves from re-experiencing the same unpleasant experience in the future. The goal then, is to take nebulous feeling of anxiety, and turn it into fear by creating an object that can then be dealt with, consciously and unconsciously. In this way, as we have already discussed, fear and anxiety differ in that fear is concrete, it has an object, whereas anxiety is diffuse.
One of the aims of psychoanalysis is to turn anxiety back into fear, to locate the object that the ego uses anxiety to conceal from itself. Fear is the real thing— which implies a human subject secure in its capacity for knowledge; anxiety is a terrible skepticism, an unknowing full of ominous expectation. Fear has an object, anxiety has a vague location. (1995, p. 59)

Phillips suggests that Freud’s notion of the repetition compulsion can be understood in terms of fear that has developmental roots—the fear of infantile helplessness and the possibility of loss (of the love object). The way one constructs his or her defenses with respect to these fears can also be cast in the light of desire: one finds a way to maintain a tie to the fear in the defense itself; while simultaneously creating the future out of the past with the promise that mastery (i.e., protection) is possible, the feared thing can be laid to rest. A Freudian psychoanalysis would aim to uncover the object of fear, and through decathexis—the process of mourning and working through—diminishing the need for compulsive repetition of the original trauma, and subsequently enlarging the patient’s ego. In the Freudian version, repetition is a form of self-protection related to the past.

Returning to the issue of anxiety that lacks an object, Phillips wonders about another defensive function of repetition: “Perhaps the most difficult thing to acknowledge, to bear, is that there is a feeling called fear that has neither a cause nor an object” (1995, p. 59). Following Sartre, Phillips argues that fear is also fear of freedom - the idea of agency means there is nobody and nothing (e.g., parents, instincts, developmental trauma) to guide (or control) us. Repetition, then, serves to keep the future predictable. Predictability is comforting, especially relative to the unknown, even if it is tinged with the possibility of unwanted pain. According to Phillips, repetition can be viewed as a form of Sartre’s ‘bad faith’—an obstacle to authenticity that is
reinforced through our deference to authority and preference for a predictable (if potentially painful) future over an unknowable one. On the other hand, fear in the context of freedom can also represent the route to authenticity. By acknowledging that there is no knowable future, no knowable self even – other than the one that will make choices about how to be at a future time – there are no constraints on the future; a situation that is likely to put us in contact with incredible dread.

We become ‘serial experts,’ according to Philips (1995), continuously expanding our store of knowledge in an attempt to turn anxiety into fear of something and finding a solution for the concrete problem through knowledge. All designed to keep awareness of death, isolation, meaninglessness and angst still abound. In this light, psychoanalysis is a system of ideas that transforms the nebulous fear associated with basic human vulnerability into something concrete – the human psyche.

**Conclusion.** Like other systems that attempt to manage the anxiety associated with human vulnerability, psychoanalysis is focused on transforming this elusive anxiety into something that can be dealt with (such as medicine does with aliment of the body and technology does with control of our environment). The unique contribution of psychoanalysis is that it deals with the realm of subjective emotional experience. As a system, psychoanalysis is limited in its ability to cure in the absolute sense of the word because it cannot alter the nature of the human condition and its attendant vulnerabilities. In this vein, psychoanalysis is surely doomed to fail, as are all systems of meaning. Culture changes as the demands of individuals and communities to manage the derivative contents of the basic human vulnerability evolve over time. The very changes that led to a rise in the prominence of subjective experience and the struggle for self-
determination in the transition from traditional culture to modernity may require a novel set of tools to navigate future changes in culture.

**Freud’s disavowal of helplessness.**

In his recently published *Freud: An Intellectual Biography*, Joel Whitebook (2017) makes the case that Freud’s theories are well-formulated for the challenges posed by modernity, namely a theory of mourning for the illusions of traditional culture, but are limited by two issues: the first is Freud’s inability to fully grasp the maternal dimension of early psychic development; the second is that because of this blind spot, Freud’s prescription of “maturity” as the project of modernity is a sobering experience that lacks mass appeal. Let us unpack this before proceeding further.

**Acceptance of finitude.** According to Whitebook, Freud’s psychoanalysis was primarily concerned with the “disenchantment” of traditional systems of meaning and “de-idealization” of authority figures – beginning with one’s parents – in the service of greater maturity, as defined by mourning the loss of the omnipotent other(s), acceptance of one’s finitude, and willingness to invest in the world despite these facts. In fact, Freud saw the entire project of modernity as the overcoming of infantilism - “being at the mercy of one’s helplessness” (Whitebook, 2017, p. 394). Freud’s interpretation of religion, which was discussed at length in chapter two, sought to expose the infantile origins of religious faith and advocated for a more rational approach to living based on the acquisition of rational self-knowledge.

Reflecting on Freud’s experience living through “the break with tradition”—the “massive social and cultural dislocations that accompanied the process of modernization in Europe” (p. 10)—and his relationship with Jung, whose pull to the occult and “irrationalism” challenged Freud to articulate the end to which psychoanalysis should aim, Whitebook (2017) writes:
Jung sought to dismantle modernity and somehow “re-enchant” the world in order to escape what he experienced as “the banality of [modern] life.” To this end, he wanted psychoanalysis to become a new counter-religion. Freud, by contrast, sought to complete “the unfinished project of modernity” and the “disenchantment of the world,” understood as the struggle to reach maturity by overcoming “magical thinking” and achieving “the omnipotence of thoughts” (p. 238).

Jung and Freud responded to the breakdown in traditional culture to opposing ends. Jung advocated for a revival of the “irrational” in novel form, while Freud struck out on a new path emphasizing the need to mourn the loss of the same irrationalism (i.e., to accept the reality that omnipotent forms of authority were illusions whose losses needed to be mourned). Ultimately, Freud felt that Jung’s interpretation of psychoanalysis (and personal behavior) posed a threat to the movement, prompting Freud to break ties with his protégée.

Whitebook notes that Freud’s preoccupation with rationality had just as much to do with his own psychology as with his prescience for the changing times. If Jung was guilty of “dismissing modern science as positivist” and ignoring “its epochal achievement: emancipating theoretical curiosity” (Whitebook, 2017, p. 255), then Freud was guilty of eschewing the irrational, infantile aspects of psychic experience to the detriment of a fuller, integrated psychoanalytic theory.

**Failure to engage with the maternal.** The second major theme of Whitebook’s biography addresses “the missing mother” and how Freud, owing to the traumatic experiences of his early childhood—especially the emotional absence of his mother—was not able to incorporate the irrational, preverbal dimension of psychic experience into his theory of
psychoanalysis. Whitebook reports that Freud experienced several traumatic losses in early childhood that closed him off to exploring the significance of the child’s early relationship with his mother, and with it, the urge for symbiosis or ‘limitless narcissism’ retained in the psyche of every individual. As a result, Freud’s work privileged the notion that the acknowledgement of one’s finitude demonstrated a triumph over omnipotence, failing to recognize the human need for merger as a pervasive human experience:

Freud’s inability to engage with the figure of the early mother and his repudiation of the symbiotic wish in himself prevented him from acknowledging that the desire to restore “limitless narcissism” is one of the strongest sources of energy in psychic life (2017, p. 414).

In other words, Freud’s overvaluation of independence and autonomy superseded the human yearning for merger that comes earlier in development as a response to infantile helplessness.

Freud’s unconscious need to reject feelings of passivity and helplessness blinded him to the fact that human beings are programmed to seek merger for the sake of relief from this vulnerability. Although Freud acknowledges the terror that infantile helplessness evokes, his Oedipal-driven theory miscalculates the degree to which the urge to fuse in symbiotic relationship with the “breast-mother” is embedded in our unconscious. At its extreme, this “psychotic core” exists in all of us, says Whitebook. Furthermore, the ability to effectively mourn the loss of objects, primarily the infantile fantasies of our omnipotent parents, requires an ego that has successfully navigated earlier phases of separation from said objects and developed the capacity to symbolize loss. Freud’s theory thus jumps the gun by assuming the successful
evolution of psychological processes that, in the case of borderline and psychotic patients, are the first focus of treatment.

**Conclusion.** According to Whitebook, Freud’s “project of modernity” consists of mourning the loss of early authority figures that first shielded us from contact with our vulnerability. Freud, due to his personal history, was eager to distance himself from his own vulnerability, which he recast as infantilism. Although Freud recognized human vulnerability at an intellectual level and addressed the role of helplessness in his theories, Freud’s inability to confront the feelings of early helplessness within himself prevented him from articulating a theory to address the earliest prototype of authority or omnipotence – the mother. The primary issue that Freud was reluctant, perhaps incapable of confronting, was the ubiquitous human need to feel connected to a source of comfort outside itself.

Freud’s failure to see this reflects not only his personal limitations, but the limitations of psychoanalysis as a whole. Breaking down the oppressive nature of traditional forms of authority does not definitively squelch the yearning for a master. As we will see in the next section, the attitude of maturity that Freud believed would free modern individual from oppressive forms of authority can be viewed as an oppressive form of control in itself.

**The suffering self.** I would like to conclude by examining a critique of the therapeutic, delivered from the perspective of sociologist Eva Illouz, in her book, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (2008). Illouz maps the emergence of the ‘therapeutic discourse,’ a cultural structure that sprang from Freud’s conception of the self in the first half of the 20th century and evolved into a therapeutic narrative of self-help that views the self as a suffering entity that must locate the origin of its pain (most often in early development) and actively work towards understanding the initial source of suffering and working through its
impact on one’s life to achieve higher levels of emotional competence. Emotional competence—the ability to communicate effectively and manage relationships successfully—is based on the post-Freudian idea that emotions, more prominent in the lives of modern individuals than in any other era, must not only be understood, but controlled. Emotions have been co-opted not only for understanding the self and its intrinsic needs and desires, but to advance one’s self-interest and goals in the domains of work and personal relationships. Illouz (2008) contends that the therapeutic narrative as it has developed in the global capitalist culture does not liberate the self as much as transforms the self into a site for everything that ails it, creating a locus for the “diseases” of modern life that, “Far from actually helping manage the contradictions and predicaments of modern identity, the psychological discourse may only deepen them” (p. 246).

The Americanized Freud. According to Illouz (2008), Freud’s ideas claimed their stake in modern consciousness because they addressed the radical changes in the private spheres of life including sexuality, family life, and gender relations while providing cognitive tools for managing an increasingly complex set of competing identities. The self was understood to originate in the emotional crucible of the family of early childhood, and normality (as opposed to pathology) was only possible following a long and arduous process akin to the work of loss and mourning described by Whitebook in the previous section.

Illouz (2008) asserts that Freud’s theories were significantly simplified and his “bleak determinism” (p. 157) was transformed into a theory emphasizing its positive and constructive elements that was better suited to American Protestant values. This transformation, in conjunction with the rise of the professional and social status of psychology in the United States and the institutionalization of psychological frameworks within the government (especially following the Second World War), corporations, and the health insurance and pharmacological
industry, solidified the place of therapeutic discourse in contemporary society, which over time morphed into the phenomenon of self-help psychology. Detailing Erickson’s and Rogers’ impact on the integration of Freud’s psychoanalysis into mainstream American psychology, Illouz (2008) writes: “These developments made psychology increasingly compatible with the values of the self-help ethos, for they suggested that growth and maturity were inherent components of the life course and that they were obtainable by conscious acts of will and volition” (pp. 158-159). The result of such modification of Freud’s theory is that the self, while not responsible for the trauma or crisis that created the psychological distress (or pathology), is responsible for bringing about its remedy.

While this stance clearly places the individual in a place of agency with respect to the sources of his or her psychological discomfort, Illouz argues that this model inadvertently propagates an image of the self that is inherently sick and maladjusted. The outcome of such a stance is problematic, according to Illouz, because it assumes that suffering always has a source, one that can be investigated and corrected if one has the conviction to do so. “In the therapeutic ethos, there is no such thing as senseless suffering and chaos, and this is why, in the final analysis, its cultural impact should worry us” (Illouz, 2008, p. 247).

**Therapeutic narrative and emotional maturity.** The therapeutic narrative of self-help suggests that psychological maturity is possible, desirable, and the culminating feature of a self-realized individual. Illouz (2008) believes that, on the contrary, the self-help narrative, by promoting the idea of a “sick” self that must be cured initiates a vicious cycle of psychological suffering:

The therapeutic narrative posits normality as the goal of the narrative of self, but because the goal is never given a clear positive content it in fact produces a wide
variety of un-self-realized and therefore sick people. The narrative of self-help is thus not the remedy to failure or misery; rather, *the very injunction to strive for higher levels of health and self-realization produces narratives of suffering.* (Illouz, 2008, p. 176, emphasis in original)

Thus, the notion of emotional maturity, initially posited by Freud as the project of modernity, has become a cultural model of selfhood that is problematic for several reasons. *A reasonable aim?* First, it suggests that individuals should be capable of achieving some finite level of emotional maturity with a single endpoint that marks fulfillment of a specific goal. While the process of therapy does aim toward greater levels of mastery in emotional and practical functioning, the complexity of this process—which mirrors the complexity of the individual’s inner life—does not fit well with the results-oriented culture that measures success in terms of number of pounds shed, dollars earned, dates secured, etc. (Strenger, 2015). If one gages success by a finite and quantifiable goal, what happens to morale when these goals go unmet, or prove unsustainable over long periods of time? Rather than viewing the path to maturity and personal growth as a lifelong process with ups and downs and detours along the way depending on how the events of one’s life unfold, the therapeutic culture that Illouz (2008) describes is based on the model of mass consumption in which what works for one person should work for all persons, and failure to achieve the desired goal is a failure of the self, not a failure of the system or its inability to comprehend the complexity of one’s inner life and external life circumstance (past and present). The fact is that failure, or setbacks, are much more probable than a linear path to success. This calls to mind the proliferation of motivational interviewing and harm reduction strategies in the realm of addiction treatment that recognize the likelihood of relapse and the need to keep the client engaged by anticipating the tremendous difficulty one is
likely to encounter when trying to modify deeply entrenched behaviors. Similarly, the psychoanalytic act of coming to know oneself, getting closer to oneself, is never complete.

*Maturity as a form of social control.* This brings us to the second problem with the therapeutic ideal of maturity. The assumption that emotional maturity is desirable is culturally constructed, beginning with Freud. As the demands of public and private life became more complex and the lines between them blurred in the 20th century, Illouz (2008) shows how emotions came to occupy a central position of importance in late modernity and how mastery of one’s emotions has become the sine qua non of professional and personal success in this age:

To the extent that emotions point to the entanglement of the self in a social relation, they also point to one’s dependence on others. Emotional control thus points to a model of sociability in which one must display the ability to remove oneself from the reach of others in order to better cooperate with them. The emotional control of the type propounded by the therapeutic persuasion is at once the mark of a *disengaged self* (busy with self-mastery and control) and of a *sociable self*—bracketing emotions for the sake of entering into relations with others. (p. 104, emphasis in original)

In this context, Illouz suggests that emotions are not only a source of information about the self, but a tool to be deployed for the sake of personal gain. In the workplace, Illouz (2008) describes an “emotional capitalism” at work in which the “emotional self” (p. 82) has become a tool to promote one’s self interest by directing or curtailing the expression of emotion for the sake of getting what one wants out of a situation (for example, managing one’s anger at work to avoid conflict with the boss). In contrast, nonstrategic expression of emotion is considered uncouth and betrays a kind of emotional immaturity that is likely to have negative consequences
on one’s professional and personal relationships. Using words to describe our internal experience, the medium of psychoanalytic therapy, while immensely important and designed for this purpose to allow for reflection on the emotional experience, is nevertheless a process of detachment from the lived experience of emotion. Illouz (2008) wonders what is given up when we focus almost exclusively on verbalized expression of our perceptions and emotional reactions: “I would argue that culturally the therapeutic persuasion may have been responsible for a vast process of verbal overshadowing that makes linguistic self-introspection a substitute for nonverbal ways of functioning in social interactions” (p. 245). The devaluation of nonverbal aspects of experience and communication appears to be a common theme in the emotional awakening of modernity.

Ironically, the more aware of and reliant on emotions we have become in the modern era, the more control society demands of us in managing them. This brings up the issue of freedom and authenticity (and the false self, which Strenger, 2015, similarly touched upon in the context of delivering a lecture in which he described the potential effects of denying the complexity of the self in contemporary society). Regarding these issues, I would only like to add that the idea of using emotions for the sake of achieving one’s socially-constructed goals of personal and professional success leaves much to be desired in the way of authentic living. This of course raises the issue of whether therapeutic endeavors, such as psychoanalysis, function in service of maintaining oppressive cultural norms or are subversive to them. On its face, the social demand to curb expression of emotions has merit: order must be maintained for the sake of smooth functioning of society. However, the cultural goal of emotional self-sufficiency denies our co-dependence as a species and denies “irrational” but meaningful emotional states from finding expression. The denial of such emotional states does not eradicate them from our psyche and
may in fact lead to an “acting out” of such emotions that can be detrimental to the individual and society. If we are to be fully human and not cultural automatons, we must have some relief from the stifling and distance inducing aspects of modern culture, which means having access to the full range of our emotional repertoire.

*Overestimation of personal agency.* The third assumption, that emotional maturity is solely within the purview of the self is problematic because it endows us with perhaps too much agency. The self-help narrative causes individuals to believe that they alone are responsible for their success in life, emotional and material, and that failure to achieve their goals is indicative of a failure of the self, a failure of the will; and thus, the individual alone is responsible for his suffering. I agree with Illouz (2008) that the ethos of the self-help narrative, by locating the source of suffering in the individual, suggests that there is no senseless suffering. The need to rationalize or reverse the inequitable distribution of resources on this planet is a reasonable endeavor; the alternative is to contend with the fact that bad things do happen and that suffering does not always have a silver lining.

**Conclusion.** I believe the psychoanalysis fails not because it lacks value, indeed I see tremendous value in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis and psychodynamic psychotherapy. Psychodynamic treatment has the potential to revive developmental processes that have stalled and repair maladaptive patterns of relating that generate considerable intrapsychic pain and impede productive and relational functioning in the world (i.e., impairment in professional and personal relationships). Gabbard and Westen (2003) report that psychoanalysis as a treatment model evokes change from multiple avenues – that the acquisition of insight (through free association and interpretation) goes hand-in-hand with elements of the therapeutic relationship that foster personal growth and maturity. Through internalization of the
analyst’s affective attitudes, interpretive function, and experience of the analyst as a new yet familiar object, the patient is able to modify various cognitive and emotional pathways to perception of experience in the service of greater autonomy and connectedness to others:

A principal mode of therapeutic action involves the patient's increasing ability to perceive himself in the analyst's mind while simultaneously developing a greater sense of the separate subjectivity of the analyst (Gabbard & Westen, 2003, p. 825). In doing so, the patient becomes more free to explore his or her subjective desires and forge a path toward authentic living, which includes greater emotional maturity and flexibility, which often have meaningful implications for the improvement of personal relationships and professional and creative pursuits.

So, while psychoanalysis is limited in its ability to quell existential terror, it is a valuable project that should be recognized for its ability to help individuals mourn whatever individual loss(es) are required to find a modicum of pleasure and engagement in the world. The failure then of psychoanalysis is not a failure to deliver on its promise to help individuals become better-adjusted to life, rather a failure to provide relief from existential terror itself. This of course is not a claim that psychoanalysis has ever made, if it exists at all it would be the result from its success in the early half of the last century, and the disappointment would be from its inability to live up to this impossibility (just as psychiatry is experiencing today). If “the fulfilled life is not one in which the existential equation is solved, but a life in which the existential equation is lived out fruitfully and creatively,” (Strenger, 2011, p. 80) then psychoanalysis as an intellectual and professional movement reflects a lived experience of existential struggle.

**Summary**

This project has aimed to show how the presence of existential concerns are woven into the fabric of culture. The focus of my inquiry has been on the defensive function culture plays
vis-à-vis existential terror, and analyzing the effects on individuals and society living through a period of significant cultural change, namely the shift from traditional culture to modernity, and how symbols of authority have changes and as a result, the efficacy of the cultural defense has been weakened.

In chapter one, we explored the concept of existential terror by way of existential philosophy beginning with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, unpacking various elements of human vulnerability – namely: conscious awareness of our mortality, the inevitability of freedom and our responsibility for creating meaning and living authentically, the separateness from others that cannot be bridged, and the knowledge that absolute systems of meaning are a necessary illusion.

Then we examined the theories of Yalom and Becker (aided by Bass), who suggest that extreme and prolonged dependence in infancy sets up a developmental trajectory whereby the cognitive process of disavowal allows for denial of separateness from the primary caregiver to manage intolerable feelings of helplessness that result from overwhelming sensory stimulation. The affective consequence of this process is an unconscious desire to merge with a powerful other that remains active in the psyche over the course of one’s lifetime to varying degree, depending upon the individual’s navigation of the separation/individuation phase of development and exposure to external stressors. In this context, transference can be understood as a psychological mechanism for managing the anxiety associated with basic human vulnerability. As development progresses, the child begins to develop a symbolic identity that is based on transference to one’s parents and subsequent identification with their authority through culture. Cultural symbols of authority generate feelings of safety and agency as they provide meaningful ways of engaging in the world and represent the primary vehicle by which self-esteem is constructed and maintained.
Our review of Terror Management Theory provided the empirical substantiation for the notion that culture serves a defensive function against awareness of existential terror. Specifically, the studies we reviewed showed how human beings respond to conscious and unconscious reminders of their mortality: conscious reminders of death were met with proximal defenses of denial and avoidance, whereas unconscious (i.e., subliminal) reminders of mortality promote symbolic modes of transcendence, cultural worldviews being one of the most effective forms of defense against awareness of existential concerns.

In chapter two, we investigated how existential terror operates at the level of culture. Specifically, we examined how radical changes in technology and science, the rise of a capitalist economy, and with it, a reshuffling of social values newly focused on the nuclear family, impacted the individual’s psyche and culture with respect to existential terror. The transition from a cultural defense based on the paradigm of religion in which god functions as an externalized figure of authority to the self, an internalized form of authority, generated tremendous existential anxiety in Western culture.

Amidst the massive shift from traditional culture to modernity, Freud posited a notion of the self as a knowable, if not enigmatic, entity, that governed human behavior at the level of the individual and society. Freud explained how religion kept the terror associated with infantile helplessness at bay by recreating the illusion of protection based on the child’s earliest relationship with its primary caregivers, and that the development of the intellect and pursuit of knowledge was a preferable alternative to the oppressive nature of religious authority because it is amenable to the reflexivity that characterizes scientific/reason-based knowledge. While Freud acknowledged the deep-rooted human need for authority to maintain psychic equilibrium in the
face of its inherent vulnerability, he viewed culture as a container for human aggression, rather than existential terror, which I argue is a derivative of the latter.

Rieff described how changes in the eighteenth-and-nineteenth-centuries culture gradually necessitated a new therapeutic paradigm to suit the emerging individualism of modern society in the West. Rieff credits Freud for articulating the cultural shift from the traditional paradigm of faith to the modern paradigm of the self.

Giddens showed us how the conditions for ontological security have undergone radical transformation in response to its inherent reflexivity. It is no longer achieved, as in traditional society, through participation in communal forms of life; rather, it depends upon development of a sense of self that is simultaneously stable and capable of adaptation to the inevitable changes in context that define our contemporary social world. The continuous revision of our collective knowledge base and social institutions means that we can no longer take any meaning for granted, which represents the greatest departure from traditional culture. Furthermore, because the social milieu is increasingly abstract and constantly evolving, the project of the self requires significant effort by the individual to give it shape and meaning. Thus, the threat of personal meaninglessness has become a pervasive feature of modern life.

Strenger took this feature of modernity and brought our discussion into the realm of contemporary social experience. His ideas validated a core tenant of this project, that contemporary individuals, despite having been given the opportunity to express their subjectivity through their personal and professional lives, nonetheless seek the “illusion of omnipotence” in the form of limitlessness, which, rather than freeing them, gives rise to a nagging feeling of inadequacy that throws doubt on the meaningfulness of a life that does not actualize the deepest levels of one’s talents and contribute to the advancement of one’s chosen field in a significant
way. The elite of contemporary society, New Cosmopolitans—those who were born with or acquired the privilege to fuse their professional interests and identity with the creative expression of their inner selves—are, despite their talents and successes, plagued by an instability of self-esteem and isolation that further distances them from feeling grounded in the social context of meaningful relationships.

Sass’ work showed how those living on the less fortunate side of the social spectrum cope, or fail to cope, with the complexity of the self in the modern social milieu. Interweaving the psychological predicament of the schizophrenic patient and the sensibilities of the modern artist, Sass argued that modern thought itself is plagued by a paradox of extreme alienness in which the individual experiences detachment from shared social meaning and a hyper-reflexivity that defies stable meaning. The modern individual—lacking a sense of being anchored to an irrefutable doctrine of meaning, authority, or purpose—is forced to turn toward inward and derive meaning, authority and purpose vis-à-vis the self. However, the self is either not sufficiently developed, or cannot shoulder the burden of such weighty existential demands. Sass concluded that schizophrenic illness appears to demonstrate heightened awareness into the paradox of modern life and that the schizoid personality is the characterological consequence of modernity.

In chapter three, Stolorow expanded our understanding of the traumatic impact existential terror can have on the individual. He argued that emotional trauma, such as the loss of a loved one, puts the individual in direct contact with existential anxiety, which can be experienced as a trauma owing to the sudden loss of ontological security it engenders. The degree of traumatic effect depends in large part on the affect-regulating relationships, pursuits, or beliefs that one has to ameliorate the effects of such emotional dislocations. TMT research supported this idea with
empirical evidence which demonstrated how mild-to-moderate levels of traumatic life events allowed individuals to keep proximal and distal modes of defense against death awareness intact, and in fact led to a reinforcement of the individual’s cultural worldview, whereas severe trauma decimated both and resulted in a complete breakdown in the worldview defense.

Salzman & Halloran explored this work in the context of cultural collapse through their qualitative study of the impact of colonialism on three genetically distinct and geographically disperse groups of indigenous peoples. Their study confirmed the findings demonstrated by ABDT and expanded their relevance from the individual to the scope of culture by showing that severe trauma as it is directed to a cultural system can result in devastating loss of meaning for the cultural group in addition to individual psychological suffering.

Lear offered a more optimistic perspective through his analysis of the survival of the Crow nation during the settlement of North America. Lear demonstrated the positive element of modernity’s reflexivity in his elaboration of the notion of radical hope, in which survival is possible if one is psychologically adroit enough to endure the cultural transformation of ideals. For new symbols of meaning to arise and take root, loss of the previous ones must be recognized and metabolized.

Young-Bruehl’s concept of social cumulative trauma likened the role of culture to the protective shield of the good-enough mother, and allowed us to posit a cumulative social trauma that occurred over the eighteenth-and-nineteenth centuries in which gradual but repeated strain was placed on the primary cultural defense against existential terror (i.e., religion, communal life). I argued that the psychological distress that accompanied centuries of cultural flux was central to the erosion of ontological security in the shift from traditional society to modernity, which was eventually lived out as a series of catastrophic traumas when the reflexivity of
modernity came to bear its fullest force upon the world, most notably during the First and Second World Wars.

Edmundson chronicled Freud’s interest in the issue of authority, noting a shift in his perspective from one of optimism that emphasized the individual’s agency in promoting psychic change through insight to a darker view of the human condition in which individuals willingly submit to oppressive forms of authority to reduce psychic tension and feel connected to a powerful other. Edmundson postulated the rise in totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century as the West’s response to the erosion of ontological security in the modern era. According to Edmundson, the twentieth century was plagued by intolerable levels of uncertainty that created more anxiety and tension than most individuals could bear, laying the groundwork for the rise of fascism in Europe and the subsequent revival of religious fundamentalism across the world.

In chapter four, we tried to make sense of the diminished status of psychoanalysis in contemporary culture. Offering practical advice for a disciple losing ground in mainstream society, Strenger advocated for inclusion in the “third culture” modality of idea sharing to reinvigorate psychoanalysis’ standing in the public domain. He argued that today more than ever, psychoanalysis has an important message to deliver about the complexity of the self as a source of meaning for individuals who feel lost and objectified by the cultural trend toward simplification and quantification of the self.

Finally, I argued that psychoanalysis fails as a conduit of the cultural paradigm of the self for three reasons: First, psychoanalysis fails because all systems of meaning are doomed to fail. Psychoanalysis cannot eradicate the anxiety inherent in living, and thus will always be limited, as all systems are, by its ability to turn diffuse anxiety about human vulnerability into a concrete problem that can be addressed. The paradox of modernity is that we live in a cultural paradigm
based on reflexivity that defies certainty yet demands the symbolic possibility of omnipotence at the same time to manage existential anxiety. Phillips argued that psychoanalysis created the psyche to have a concrete location to act out its solutions to existential anxiety.

The second reason psychoanalysis fails is that it does not provide an effective buffer against existential terror in the form of externalized authority. Freud, having recognized how traditional forms of authority had become sickness-inducing to modern individuals, sought to emancipate his patients from the tyranny of oppressive symbols of authority. In its place, he offered psychoanalytic theories and praxis as a means of working through our need for authority so we could invest our energies in the world in a less stultifying way. Although Freud recognized that the need for authority stemmed from contact with vulnerability, he thought that with the right form of treatment people could rise above this need and assume a stance of “maturity.” Whitebook helped us see the limitations of Freud’s “project of modernity;” namely, that its preoccupation with rationality does not allow for the very human striving for merger with an external source of authority, however irrational and potentially destructive it may be.

The third reason psychoanalysis fails has to do with the difficulty associated with achieving a state of “maturity,” and the question of whether such an accomplishment is desirable. Illouz provided a critique of the therapeutic narrative of self-help that evolved out of Freud’s articulation of the self as a subjective and knowable entity. She argued that the simplified, Americanized version of therapy has become synonymous with a self that is sick, and that failure to be cured is a failure of the self. The notion that emotions are to be tightly controlled and used for the advancement of self-interest suggests that freedom from the tyranny of oppressive authority is no longer the primary objective of the therapeutic endeavor. The question whether therapy works in the service of maintaining oppressive cultural norms or freeing the individual
from them. This has been a question asked myriad of times since Karl Kraus suggested psychoanalysis is the disease it purports to cure.
References


