

The First Italian Congress on Existential Psychotherapy

The “First Italian Congress on Existential Psychotherapy” was held at the European University in Rome, on May 23 and 24, 2014.

The congress has addressed the issue of the clinical guidelines and relations with psychology, psychiatry, counseling and philosophical counseling. This made the congress a platform on which different schools had the chance to compare their different methodological approaches on existential field; the aim of this encounter – its peculiarity – was to get to a “possible and successful integration of approaches”, this aim was fully achieved. Considering the Italian scene, which is distressed by attempts to mark boundaries between different disciplines - based on what each discipline is not rather than on each discipline actual potential – this integration acquires a real extraordinary meaning.

During the introduction to the congress, Mr. **Gianfranco Buffardi**, a well known psychiatrist, who was the scientific director of this event, explained that “the existential psychotherapy broadens its horizons to integration without hesitation, as it is able to dialogue with other methods (clinical interview, psychopharmacological approach, counseling, philosophical counseling, mediation) and with any other model of the mind. In fact, the model to which it refers is ethically correct - he says - as it is non-deterministic. The non-invasiveness of existential psychotherapy is facilitated by the suspension of judgment (*epoché*) made by the expert”. He also stressed that “the choice of the integration between therapeutic processes in psychiatry is the answer to an ethics need as well as to an operational utility, as it allows the modularity and malleability of the intervention”.

Therefore, just like the case of England, where organizations such as BACP (British Association for Counseling & Psychotherapy), BPS (British Psychological Society) and «ES Association» of Mr. **Ernesto Spinelli**, which have been having a dynamic and productive dialogue between methods, the Italian congress was open not only to existential psychotherapists, but to all those who, like Buffardi says, could have an interest in “acquiring an existential psychotherapeutic competence in order to implement their potential to treat and improve the approach to the patient”.

In the introduction to the congress, Mr. **Buffardi** had already clarified that “the congress proposes -for the first time in Italy- a dialogue between the schools of existential psychotherapy, born from the same epistemological and clinical principles which had independent and differentiated developments. In contrast to the humanistic-existential psychotherapy, existential psychotherapy is closely related to philosophical consideration of his own existential thought,

having as their bases principles such as unity and the irreducibility of the individual, the existence which precedes essence, and the malleability of the possibilities human. The anthropophenomenological-existential philosophy has been constant companion of the considerations of clinical psychiatrists and psychopathologists (Jaspers, Binswanger, Minkowski, Lang, Cargnello, Piro, Szas, Callieri, Borgna), in constant search of tools that could communicate with the singularity of man, in order to support them on the change and in overcoming their difficulties. In recent years different methodologies have been developed, such as those of the helping professions, which arise from the same existential model, but do not have therapeutic expertise. The integration of different methodologies can foster the growth of the individual and support the therapeutic process: hence the need to promote dialogue between these methodologies, as part of the aim of this congress. Unlike other psychotherapies, existential psychotherapy does not identify an etiological origin of a disease to act against, but supports and enhances the ability of the individual to act against difficulties. This means that it can be a choice even in conditions of severe discomfort caused by physical illness”.

The congress, under the patronage of the *Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies*, has had three key proponents: The *European University of Rome*, the *Italian Society of Existential Psychotherapy* (SIPE), the *Institute of Human and Existential Sciences* (ISUE) and the *Institute of Philosophy and Clinic Existential Anthropology* (IFACE). The support of the European University of Rome, was expressed with great conviction in the welcome message from the Dean, Padre **Luca Maria Gallizia**. These institutions are an expression of the fine work of a few men, who were the protagonists of this initiative – allow me to use this analogy, perhaps not so farfetched - like modern Argonauts.

The *Italian Society of Existential Psychotherapy* is based in Turin and is directed by the psychiatrist **Lodovico Berra**. It was founded "in 1998 with the intention of bringing together psychologists, psychiatrists and psychotherapists interested in a active comparison on phenomenological-existential oriented psychology and psychotherapy".

ISUE, based in Naples, was founded in 1988 by professionals such as psychiatrist **Gianfranco Buffardi**, who is President, and **Ferdinando Brancaleone**, psychotherapist and scientific director of the Institute. Among the key goals of the organization there is the promotion of neo-existential psychological model, and in particular the spread of alternative methodologies in the helping professions, such as counseling. In addition, the Institute is currently promoter of the *Clinic Existential Anthropology*.

The same orientation to *Existential Anthropology* characterizes the *Institute of Philosophy and Clinic Existential Anthropology* (IFACE). This institution has its headquarters in Rome and is directed by **Guido Traversa**, Professor of Moral Philosophy at the European University and coordinator of the Master in Consulting Existential Philosophy and Anthropology at the Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum, which owns the indisputable merit of having taken the philosophical practice away from the listless limit imposed by the Italian academic world, and the merit of having promoted the opening of Philosophical Counseling to dialogue with other therapeutic methods which have philosophical substratum, in particular the phenomenological-existential.

These are the people who led the work, which for all of them was - quoting **Lodovico Berra**- “the finish line and the starting point at the same time” of their careers path. Starting point because, as Berra explained, it is the first time that there is such discussion on the existential topic, which seemed to be marginal in the context of psychotherapy, psychiatry and psychopathology. The inspiration came from the announcement of the World Congress for Existential Therapy planned for 2015 in London, coinciding with the initiative of **Ernesto Spinelli** to create a World Confederation of Societies of Existential Psychotherapy. The survey about this sector highlighted a reality widely heterogeneous world, where it is possible to see the merging of both similar and different guidelines – like Binswanger anthropoanalysis, the Daseinanalyse, Logotherapy, or various humanistic approaches – reflection of the multifaceted composition of existentialism (or more properly 'existentialisms'), which make it necessary to define an identity in spite of the diversity.

Thus the need expressed by the congress, and emphasized by **Berra**, is the call for an attempt to find common points within differences and peculiarity of each school, so as to give a connotation to the current Italian existential approach in the belief that the differences are a resource, as well as a guarantee of enrichment and dynamism.

The comparison between the different schools was conducted in the frame of three sessions on the following topics:

- I. Philosophy, Anthropology and existential anthropophenomenology;
- II. Existential psychotherapy: clinical and treat;
- III. The methodologies for help and existential psychotherapy.

Within these areas, in addition to the numerous interventions of well known speakers, there were held the *lectiones magistrales* of the German bioethicist **Dietrich von Engelhardt** and the aforementioned **Ernesto Spinelli**, some particularly stimulating seminars and workshops were held as well at the same time. **Ernesto Spinelli** has held, in fact, a workshop named *Existential therapy in practice: other-focused listening and challenging*, in which he explained - on the basis of its experience in existential therapeutic practice – the possibilities and difficulties that the therapist encounters in the relationship with the customer. **Luigi Longhin**, psychotherapist, member of the OPIFER Institute and Neo-Freudian Institute, addressed the topic *Why so much violence?*; **Giudo Traversa**, together with **Stefania Lombardi** and **Daniela Pavoncello**, held a workshop on *Dominant passions*; **Valeria Salsi**, educator and member of ISUE, **Mario Truscello**, existential educator, director of ISUE project "interior painting", and the psychiatrist and psychotherapist **Bruno Valente** demonstrated the correspondence between art and therapy; **Ferdinando Brancaleone**, together with the philosophical counselors and existential counselors from ISUE **Renato Massimiliano Buffardi** and **Rosa Sgambato**, carried out a workshop on *Philosophical Counseling*; **Gianfranco Buffardi**, in collaboration with the existential psychotherapist and counselor **Anna Desiato**, discussed on *Pharmacotherapy, psychotherapy and existential counseling: integration processes for major psychiatric disorders, psychosis and depression*.

Moreover, a poster area was set up on permanently display in the two-days activities of the congress; it presented interesting results and prospects of study, including: *Resilience and existential psychotherapy*, by **A. Desiato**; *Sexology and existential psychotherapy*, by **R. Sgambato**; *The existential model applied to the treatment of autistic systems: a change in direction*, by **Maria Francesca Ferraro**; *Saramago writer and existentialist philosopher*, by **M. Truscello**, **Renato M. Buffardi** and **G. Buffardi**; *The existential psychotherapy and addictions*, by **A. Desiato**, **B. Valente** and **G. Buffardi**; *Neo-existential Psychotherapy*, by **F. Brancaleone** and **G. Buffardi**; *The Logoanalysis as Socratic art*, by **Rosa Ciacco**, philosophical and existential counselor at ISUE; *"Inverse Canon" a new ethic of suffering and existential distress*, by **Divina Lappano**, philosophical and existential counselor at ISUE; *Passions and opportunities in times of crisis: who was Shakespeare to Freud*, by **Stefania Lombardi**; *Existential Counseling and self-writing*, **Maddalena Sannino**, philosophical and existential counselor at ISUE.

As for the reports, after the introduction to the themes and motivations expressed by Buffardi and Berra, there was the first *lectio magistralis*. **Dietrich von Engelhardt**, German philosopher and bioethicist, director of the Institute of the History of Medicine and Science of the Medical University of Lübeck, illustrated the relationship *disease-ill, and treatment-doctor in the*

anthropological perspective.

After the speech of Professor Von Engelhardt, Mr. **Guido Traversa** made a speech pondering on *Treatment: why philosophy and which philosophy?*, he highlighted the vital role of logical, ontological and ethical structures, to establish a notion of personal identity from which set the philosophical, existential and "treatment" discourse.

The report of **Claudia Navarini**, bioethicist and professor of moral philosophy at the UER, has evaluated the *Difficult auto-determination of the existence of the ego between phenomenology of existence and ethics*. Starting from the consideration that "man in the personal relationship is always experienced as structurally dependent on the other and also as an individual with a unique and unitary form", therefore existence is characterized by "the tension between individual knowledge, deeper form at epistemological level, and categorization of experience, the result of the abstraction process.

The psychiatrist **Gilberto di Petta** in the report *Analysis of dasein: duality and plurality of treatment*, reiterated the efficiency of the therapeutic model with phenomenological approach derived from the Daseinanalyse of Binswanger, personally experienced in the activity carried out at the public health and social services, in particular in the field of drug abuse.

After Di Petta report, there was the first seminar, with the theme *101 years after the General Psychopathology: on Jaspers*, chairman **Oreste Trabucco**, philosopher and historian of science. During this seminar **Gianfranco Buffardi** presented the as a practical evolution of the Jaspers' lesson on psychopathology. Through instruments such as the *Consciousness Logoanalysis and the subliminal Logodynamics*, it *practically* produces epistemological references in counseling and existential psychotherapy, which have their main point in Jasper (e.g. man in its totality, uniqueness, unrepeatable, understanding in place of clarify, judgment suspend). **Giuseppe D'Acunto** and **Massimiliano Biscuso** carried on the comparison, both professors of philosophy at the APRA and the UER, they have reported on the principles underlying the idea of existential analysis of Medard Boss, and on some ideas taken from the text *The doctor in the age of technique* by Jaspers, respectively. They were joined by **Riccardo Piovesana**, from the Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium), who focused on the concept of *Einfühlung* (empathy), by giving a reading as a movement of understanding, in relation to the phenomenological consideration of Edith Stein, in order to delineate problematics in the psychopathology context, between limitations and relevance of the work of Jaspers.

The second workshop was held during the second session, the topic was *Tools and preparatory methods*. **Maria Rosaria Liotto**, existential counselor in Naples, by describing *Auto-distancing and humor in the thought of Frankl*, recalled the great lesson of the German psychiatrist on the humor ability of emotional restructure, as it is, in fact, a factor of auto-distancong. The same author was quoted by **Fabrizio Biasin**, calling for a critical assessment of the concept of epoché as declined in philosophy field and in the context of clinical psychology. **Gianfranco Buffardi**, moreover, presented the training to nonspecific intervention as necessary, considering the non-specific factors of psychotherapies (suspension of judgment, extension of maps, meta-communication, empathy, etc.), which are considered ethically valid and with an intrinsic therapeutic content, as well as active in most of the helping professions; they undoubtedly entail benefits, such as: increased of the patient awareness, less risk of existential "relapse", "reasoned" containment of projections, and a greater effectiveness of the specific intervention of the adopted model. As last part of the seminar the volume of the psychiatrist **Adolfo Ferraro** was presented: *I want the snow here in Aversa. Writing on the walls of the judiciary psychiatric hospital*, which brought to attention the graffiti of the patients, as a tribute to life, demonstrating the overwhelming - and not negligible in any form of expression - human need to communicate, talk and tell.

Ernesto Spinelli gave a remarkable speech, harbinger of new perspectives: *Relatedness, Uncertainty and Anxiety: An Existential Perspective*. The psychotherapist, of Italian descent, is the chairman of ES Associates in London, which was founded in 1988, it has been observing the phenomenon of existential-phenomenological-oriented methodologies in an attempt to give a definition of existential analysis.

After Spinelli's speech, **Lodovico Berra** presented *The main aspects of existential psychotherapy SIPE*. The psychiatrist, while acknowledging the influence of Freud on Heidegger and Binswanger, reflected in the anthro-po-analysis models and in the Dasainanalyse, talked about Boss, Jaspers, Minkowski, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and then reconnect to the thought of Michele Torre (of whom he was a student), Mr. Torre was a psychiatrist during the '900 and the director of the Institute of Clinical Psychiatry and the School of Specialization in Psychiatry at the University of Turin.

Ferdinando Brancaleone declared himself widely convinced that there is now configuring a new vision of the world, from an anthropological perspective, taken by some of the key concepts of existential philosophy, he discussed on *Neo-existential anthropology, psychotherapy and helping*

professions. He has highlighted a factor that it is directly linked to the philosophies of existence, one of the states of consciousness. In line with the concept of relationship expressed by Spinelli, Brancalone recalled that the basic principle of what he calls "philosophies of existence" is "existence precedes essence".

The psychotherapist **Domenico Bellantoni** (ALÆF and UPS in Rome) has proposed guidelines for a *Franklian analytic existential strategy*, while **E. De Monte** and **Antonio Tamburello**, professor of Clinical Psychology in UER have illustrated The concept of matrix of order the meanings of life between becoming and perpetuity. The psychiatrist **Luigi Scapicchio**, director of "Psychiatrists Today", in his report on *The desire for happiness*, has retraced the definition of this concept in the history of philosophy. The psychotherapist **Javier Fiz Perez**, a bioethicist and professor at UER, argued the ethical reasons of *Social psychology and existential philosophy for an integrated approach*, while **Anna Contardi**, psychotherapist, researcher in Clinical Psychology at UER, discussing on *Health and Wellness in the cognitive-causal model*, highlighted that the peculiarities of the cognitive-causal model is the aim to promote contact with the sense of personal value that exists in every person, regardless of other emotional conditions, situational and relational.

The third seminar, which chairmen were **Giovanna Borrello**, philosopher and philosophical counselor, and **Anna Paladino**, psychologist and educator, has addressed the issue of *Woman and existential psychotherapy*, during which **Elizabetta Zamarchi**, philosophical counselor and member of board of the SICOF (Italian Society of Philosophical Counseling), discussing on *The female in the oxymoron of an dependent autonomy: what is the existential project of the women of the third millennium?*, she has exposed "the idea of a 'philosophical treatment' intended to clarify the unique value of each subjective experience, as discriminating against the mindless adherence to models of femininity serial or utopias of fusion relational". After that, **Viviana Lo Schiavo**, a psychologist and counselor in Naples, presented the *Existential Mediation as an additional mode of intervention in the field of Existential Counseling*. In conclusion, **Vittorio Volterra**, a psychiatrist and professor of forensic psychiatry at the University of Bologna, and **Viviana Visca**, criminologist in Trento, have recognized the benefit of an existential approach to the treatment of subjects guilty of stalking.

An additional field of study was offered by the seminar about *Applications of existential model in helping professions*, which chairman was **Fernando Boscaino**, sociologist and existential counselor. **Antonio Scala**, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at the Second University of Naples,

presented the implications in psychosocial rehabilitation, where the Therapeutic Community is to take an important pedagogical and therapeutic function because, by applying the concept of “caring” rather than simply “treat”, it focuses not on the symptoms, but the Presence, becoming, therefore, the goal, not so much to help the patient in the recovery of lost skills, but rather to rehabilitate the “way of being” in various sizes: body, space, time, and relationships. **Daniel Sousa**, professor at the Higher Institute of Applied Psychology in Lisbon, has instead proposed the method of the *Phenomenological Genetic Analysis of existence*, derived from the “static and genetic phenomenological method” of Husserl, describing it as capable of sublimating the existing dichotomy in the field of existential psychotherapy between descriptive methods or interpretive intervention. The speech of **Giancarlo Marinelli**, philosophical counselor at SICOF, was about *The philosophical practice and the phenomenological-existential thought. Opportunities and starting points*; **Silvana Ceresa**, psychologist, psychotherapist, member of the board of SIPE, discussed on *Psychotherapy and philosophical counseling: differences and peculiarities*, she affirms the appropriateness of a communication between different schools in order to avoid the risk that Jung called “a psychology without a soul”, which decays to the sociology of the individual. She pointed out that psychology and philosophy are actually a reflection of one another, and above all, they both “represent 'education', not at a basic level but at level of the deutero-learning of Bateson, learning to learn, through the acquisition of cognitive structures through experience”.

The positive outcome of the congress would have been very different without the contribution of **Anna Desiato**, existential psychotherapist and counselor, **Rosa Sgambato**, existential psychologist and counselor, **Sara Boscaino**, interpreter, and **Renato Massimiliano Buffardi**, philosophical and existential counselor, who contributed to carry out the seminar works and to the management of organizational aspects.

Overall, in the richness of the interventions, which have shed light on the many facets of the existential context, common points emerged; on such basis, it will be possible to work on a paper to formalize the “unity in diversity” of the Italian context, with the aim of facing the global context.

Written by Rosa Ciacco, with integrations and participation of Guido Traversa.