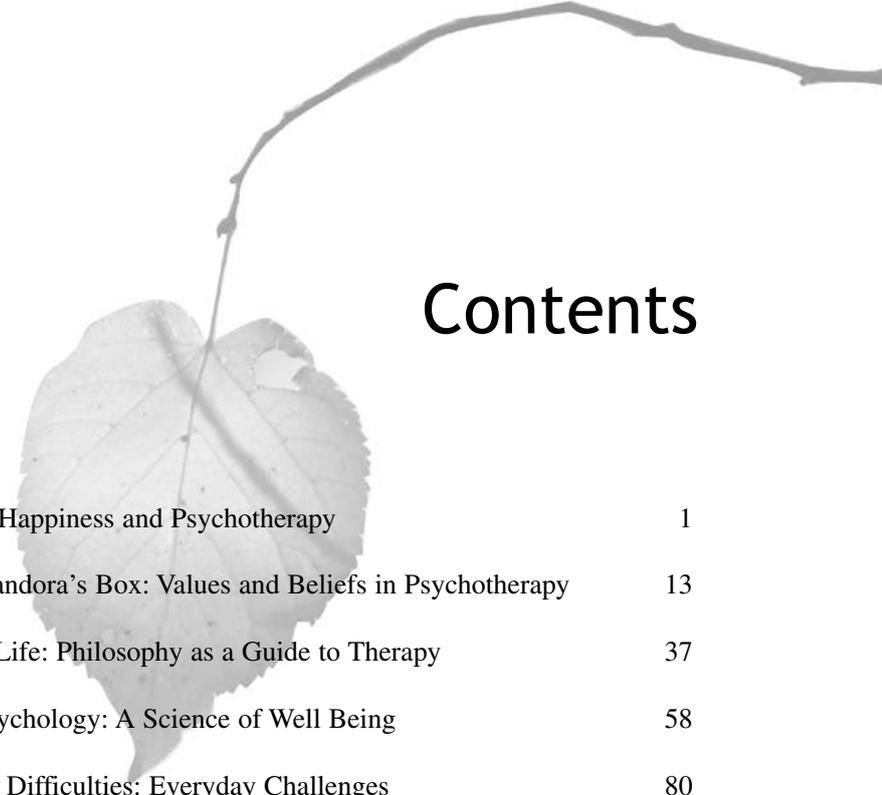


Emmy van Deurzen  
**Psychotherapy and the  
Quest for Happiness**

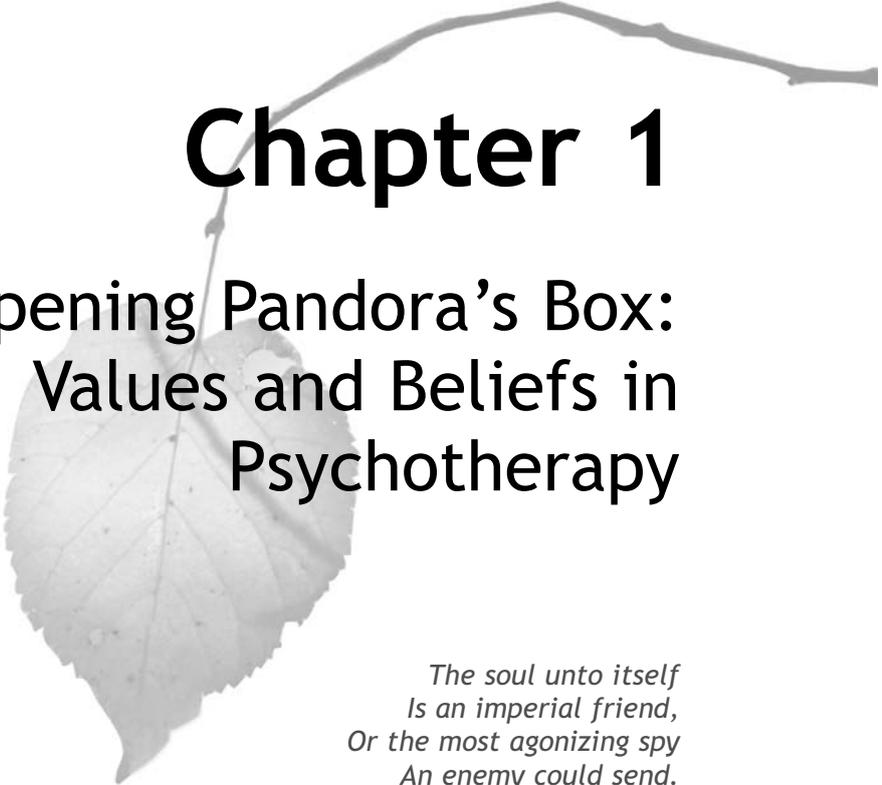
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# Chapter 1

## Opening Pandora's Box: Values and Beliefs in Psychotherapy

*The soul unto itself  
Is an imperial friend,  
Or the most agonizing spy  
An enemy could send.*

*(Emily Dickinson, 1994: 46)*

So, what is the role of therapy in our elusive quest for happiness? What is it that people hope to get from counselling and psychotherapy? Do they seek to meet a friend who has their best interests at heart and who will help them live a happier life? If so, are their expectations realistic and is therapy up to the challenge? Is therapy a refuge where people come to create the illusion that they may be able to overcome all their troubles and live happily ever after? What is happiness anyway?

The *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines happiness as a feeling that causes pleasure or satisfaction. The internet-based encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, defines happiness as 'a prolonged or lasting emotional or affective state that feels good or pleasing' (Wikipedia, 2006). Is therapy meant to achieve such a positive pleasurable and lasting emotional state for clients? In other words should therapy make things better and people feel good? If so, is therapy based on wishful thinking and does it conjure up a kind of utopia, which is ultimately unobtainable or unsustainable? We need to find out whether therapy deals with the real human questions or whether it deals with the ephemeral and short-term effects of suggestion only. Does therapy tackle the fundamental human issues of good and evil, life and death, anxiety and despair for instance? We shall start our journey of understanding therapy and its quest for happiness by looking at

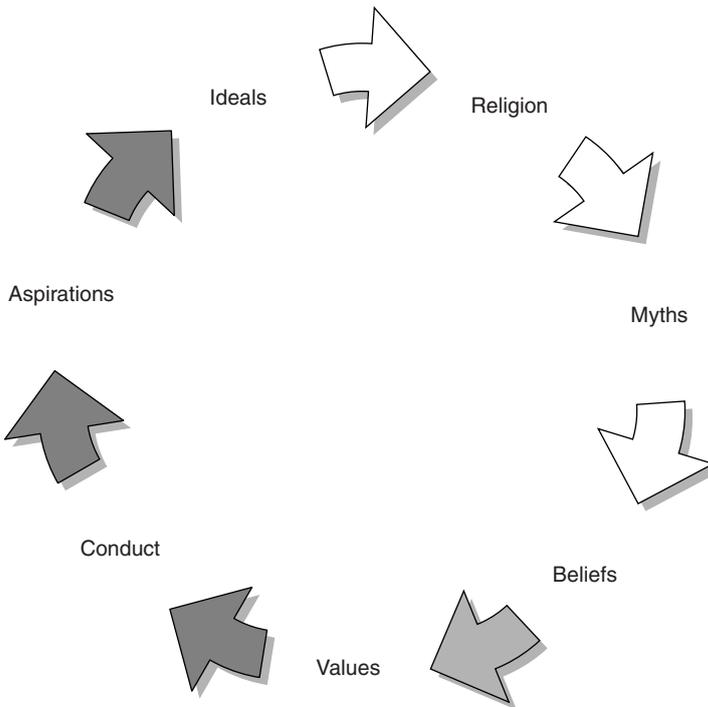
the ideology and belief systems on which our society and its new therapeutic aspirations are based, for they define our expectations of happiness.

## Culture and ideology

Every culture entices or forces people into its dominant ideology, even when it tolerates varied beliefs and leaves some people to live in the margins of society. It teaches us to believe certain things and to disbelieve others. It prescribes certain fundamental rules of conduct and it demands a usually fairly strict obedience to these principles and their code of honour. It does so by giving us a set of prohibitions on the one hand and a set of injunctions and objectives in the form of ideals and aspirations on the other hand. These conventions and values are usually neatly wrapped in the culture's religion, which links people together. It does so by being centred around one or more holy texts, which cannot be questioned, since they are defined as divine or holy. Such adherence to a prescribed worldview magically transforms chaos into order and confusion into meaning.

This sacred link uniting the culture can be many different things, but if it is to acquire religious and sacred status it has to be rooted in a mythology which refers to the culture's origin and which cannot be questioned and has to be taken on faith. We can only truly belong to a culture to the extent that we accept its framework of reference. Its ideas, rules, beliefs and conventions are effectively distributed through the network of families and institutions that form the substratum of the culture. They are passed on in the form of values and these values may change somewhat from one generation to the next according to the times and mores and depending on what is most desirable and sought after at any particular moment. Cultures draw their power from these underlying beliefs and give direction to the individual's actions by aiming for certain defined ideals and standards, which are themselves derived from the ideology of the society. Values are the principles that dictate what something is worth in comparison to everything else. Values allow people to evaluate their experiences or possessions and put a price on them. Values are the measure of what people come to expect for and of themselves and they provide clarity about the objectives and characteristics of a well lived life. Values are determined by how much we are willing to give up in order to acquire or keep the thing we value. An ultimate value is something you would give everything up for, including your own life. The ultimate value is the ultimate good of our society and this is opposed by its ultimate evil: its arch enemy, that which we fear most. Evil is essentially that which actively undermines or threatens the good that we value. Usually it appears to do so gratuitously.

Each culture incorporates a view about good and evil. This is necessary if people are to have a definite sense of what is desirable and undesirable so that



**Figure 1.1** The cycle of ideology

they know how to act and what to aim for in life. The image of good and evil is graphically represented in the myth of creation that exists in a society, since this myth defines the fundamental conflicts out of which their world has grown. As such it lays the foundations of the sort of life an individual in this society can come to expect. So our lives are anchored from the outset in a clear and unambiguous explanation about the origin and purpose of human beings: we are told in no uncertain terms what the good and bad ways of acting are and how we should behave. We are offered a sequence of myths, values, beliefs and aspirations that keep us within a safe circle of good behaviour and which are summarized and organized by the edicts of our ideology or religion. We operate our lives within these parameters and find our evaluations within their boundaries.

Religions and their myths of creation are the magic circles within which cultures thrive. A myth of creation exists in every culture, but may not be present in an obvious way. In Western culture, in the twenty first century, we are divided in our mythology, for we are absorbing many varied myths and there are diverse groups amongst us, each living by their own legends and holy stories. Mostly our societies are still well embedded in the old established Judeo-Christian narratives about the origin of mankind in the Garden

of Eden. Since Islam is also derived from the Old Testament, it too is compatible with that myth. Whilst Hindu and Buddhist notions are very different they have generally taken up a less prominent position in the Western world, quite likely because they do not include the same evangelical aspirations as the monotheistic religions do.

## The core mythology and a new contender for the throne

Much of Western living is still set against the backdrop of our expulsion from an imagined paradise and the sense that things could be so much better if this had not happened. Deep down we attribute our fall to human frailty and failure. The purpose of existence remains that of the struggle with original sin and people hanker after a time when all will be forgiven and they will be admitted to a heavenly abode and rewarded for their hard work on earth. This myth is still written into most of our memories and drives us forward to great and small achievements and the best behaviour we can muster. We seek redemption and expect positive results if we do our best, aiming for better times to come later, either in this life or after our death.

What we often seem to forget is that in our cultural myth this endless striving is the result of Adam and Eve's inability to resist temptation; not the temptation of exquisite pleasure though, but rather the temptation to follow a natural curiosity and taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Their exodus from paradise is cleverly engineered by the seductive serpent who reminds them of their capacity to choose and eat the forbidden fruit. And they get precisely what they asked for: outside of the Garden of Eden they are exposed to the immediate knowledge of the gender differences between them, feelings of shame, regret and guilt and awareness of the contrast between life and death. They are confronted with human suffering, labour, conflict and responsibility. And so it is that human history and culture begin, in suffering; for outside of the Garden of Eden we have to survive by our own wits and the sweat of our brow. As soon as human beings come into the real world they have to learn to survive and record their learning to pass it on to the next generation. They also have to learn to suffer.

It is precisely because we have had to deal with all these existential problems over many millennia that we have evolved various ingenious ways of survival. And it is that same ingenuity that has ultimately led to a new global value system and a new set of beliefs, namely that of science and technology and its concomitants of industry and consumerism. All these are generated from the same desire to reduce suffering and achieve an easier way of life by applying our intelligence. The emphasis is now firmly on the human capacity for knowledge and understanding and the desirability of achievement and competition. Since the late nineteenth century Darwinian evolutionary theory

has finally produced a suitable alternative myth of creation for this new religion, one that fits with the new spirit of optimism and belief in mankind's great capacity for scientific observation and technological prowess. Evolution is what we are about. The Big Bang theory of early twentieth century physics has at the same time provided the necessary cosmological backdrop to the new ideas and so the scene is set for a complete overhaul of our dominant ideology.

## Science as religion

Few people are aware of the extent to which the contemporary scientific spirit has gradually taken on the guise of an ideology. It has been a gradual and surreptitious take-over bid. But it has been an extremely successful one, because the tenets of the new scientific belief system can be so easily distributed through the new churches, schools, media and universities and are so easily absorbed and so eminently sensible. Of course the new religion confuses us more than the old ones, for it is far less stable and commands a formidable authority based on the facts and products that it continuously generates. No church has ever been able to do such compelling magic. Science comes up with new ideas, data and theories on a regular basis and demands that we stay informed at all times: the objective is for us to evolve and to stay in touch with the latest inventions, theories and gadgets, lest we become outmoded, outdated and out of touch. The objective is to live ever smoother and more dynamic lives, striving to achieve as much of our potential as possible by basing our everyday activities on scientific data for maximum success. No wonder the culture of youth has got the upper hand. No wonder we are obsessed with longevity, fitness and happiness. The age of information has firmly replaced the age of knowledge, which had previously already replaced the age of wisdom. While wisdom can only emerge from maturity, fast changing information relies on immediacy and fits better with the vitality of youth. So now we no longer adjust our conduct to the old values and well established routines of our ancestors and forebears nor in terms of the word of our gods, but rather in line with the new evidence provided to us by the latest research. We live evidence-based lives and we take our cues from the media to keep us informed of the latest fashions and values to follow. One day we are told to eat or do one thing for a longer, healthier life, the next the evidence has changed and we are advised to pursue another new fad. Politicians have also learnt to use and manipulate scientific data to their advantage: they all dance to the same tune and propose new legislation in line with the new evidence available. No wonder they do not come up with widely differing views any longer. They steer a course between the scientific data and the popular opinions formed by the media.

And so we no longer worship the symbols of divinity and eternal life nor do we aim very much to emulate our elders. They are far too much out of date. We are not nearly as interested in universal values, but attracted by the glitter

of the promise of immediate and direct results. So we worship the icons of glamorous and successful living proffered by society. We aspire to possess the latest gadgets and gimmicks and lifestyles, demonstrated to us by the stars and celebrities who seem to have the edge on this fast and high life. Though, unsurprisingly, many of us find this tyranny of celebrity and media culture with its heady mix of pseudo science, politics, soap, popular opinion and its daily parade of cars, clothes and beautiful people frustrating, unsatisfactory and irritatingly trivializing. It fails us by not addressing us as individuals with a real project or a personal part to play in the scheme of things. The secular values held out to us are so ephemeral that they do not bind us together in quite the same, profoundly spiritual and deeply emotional way that the old religions were capable of doing. In fact they divide us for we are now forever in competition with each other for those few rare places in the sun of an imagined Eldorado of fame and fortune.

In addition we have been left with a constant tension between the co-existing old and new religions. That tension has to be dealt with in some way. One of the ways of doing this is by coming up with a compromise solution. A possible compromise is to integrate the scientific theories with a satisfactory concept of purpose. One candidate for such a theory is that of Intelligent Design, which is the belief that God created the world (perhaps with a Big Bang) but then left this newly created world to evolve in accordance with Darwin's evolutionary principles. This is a solution favoured by those who want to save the old religions, but it dilutes these considerably and is not to everyone's taste.

There are other solutions to the puzzle. Nihilism is a popular solution, consisting of giving up on any spirituality whilst simply living in the secular sphere. Agnosticism is a weaker form of the same basic attitude. But many people find this negation of spirituality too extreme and harsh, so they simplify the problem by splitting their lives in two. They espouse the old religions with new intensity in private moments, whilst living their modern lives along secular lines. This makes it harder to know what personal or moral objectives to follow. It becomes ever more tempting to follow a simple and apparently attractive and straightforward objective like the quest for happiness. Indeed if we frankly opt for the values of the secular world, which are essentially based in the pursuit of maximum pleasure, comfort and ease in a material world, we become Hedonists. If we seek to remain true to some of the older values we may seek happiness by pursuing some form of Eudaemonia: the search for the good life by living in harmony with the demon, or the force of life. But we have a plethora of demons on offer to us and there is a multitude of new spiritual pursuits available to us as well.

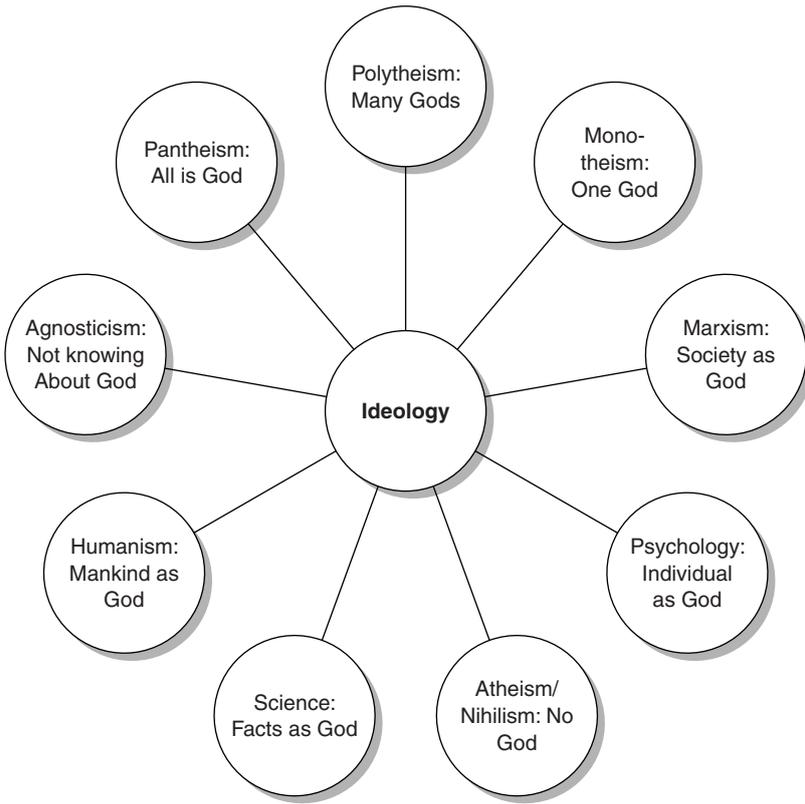
## Ideologies redefined

In the midst of all this confusion most of us now live with some form of hybrid belief, frequently without awareness of exactly what truths and objectives

guide us. On the one hand we believe in human ingenuity and bolster our confidence by engrossing ourselves in technologically based and hedonistically orientated twenty first century pursuits. On the other hand we continue to worship the principles of some form of old fashioned religion or some new set of humanistic values. We may for instance foreground charity for others who are worse off than us or we may set stock by honesty or loyalty. The great televised charitable events like Live Aid or Children in Need appeal to many of us as they bind us together with a common purpose and make us briefly feel better about humanity and the world we live in. Most of us have some value that takes us to a higher plain, beyond that of purely monetary and sensory satisfaction. We tend to feel good about ourselves when we perform some action in relation to those principles, whereas we feel good in ourselves when we pursue the sensory pleasure principle. All the same the contradictions between these two modes of operating are glaringly obvious and it is no wonder that people often confess to being perplexed or confused about what the purpose of their life really is. They might believe in fame, success, wealth or pleasure as the ultimate principles to define their lives in a secular way, but underneath they will sense that this is not really enough and that by the standards of their hidden ideology a lot more is required of them. We end up living in a state of vaguely defined but constant existential guilt. The trouble is that most of us do not have the time or the opportunity to stand still long enough to think about the reasons for this. We do not really know what motivates our lives. More often than not people end up believing that all they want is to just be happy and if possible make some others happy in the process as well.

What people fail to see is that this search for happiness as a pure form of hedonism has enormous drawbacks since it makes it hard to accept any aspect of human living that involves deprivation, pain, sorrow, hardship, aging or failure: all things that religions normally seek to absorb, validate and integrate. Hedonism is often a form of Humanism, which is the belief that human beings are the highest form of life around and that the primary goal of life must be their happiness and fulfilment. It is one of the many forms of ideology people hold today. A variety of these are illustrated in Figure 1.2.

Ideologies provide us with a clear moral framework of values, beliefs and aspirations, for they tell us what the ultimate cause and objectives of life are, whether the ideology has been theistic or not. Humanity has had theistic ideologies for as long as history has been recorded or wherever on the globe we look. From Polytheism to Monotheism, there have long been religious explanations of our existence that place us safely within the lap of some God or gods. But there have also been other explanations of how the universe fits together. Buddhism and Taoism and many forms of Western philosophy have aimed to explain the universe without resorting to a god. Western thinking has of course been dominated by Christian thinking for millennia, though all this was changed at the end of the nineteenth century when religious ideology was replaced with scientific accounts of human evolution and motivation. Darwinism,



**Figure 1.2** Ideological range

Marxism and Freudianism revolutionized human thinking; the notion of human purpose was drastically altered. We were cut off from our roots and from our skies all at the same time. Darwin questioned the very principle of creation and replaced it with his theory of evolution which could provide a more credible principle of explanation for our existence but left us believing that the main motivation and rather minimalist objective of our lives was that of the survival of the fittest. Marx threw all religious thinking out as mere addiction, calling it the opium of the people and preferring economic theory and a fervent belief in an egalitarian principle that would bring the oppressed masses into power: a profound belief in the human capacity for social evolution, foreshadowed by Hegel. Unfortunately the wisdom of the masses turned out to be less reliable than he had hoped. Freudian theories also eloquently rejected religious thinking as wishful and described it as the mere sublimation of the sexual instinct. This idea took root in the popular mind and together with other cultural developments, such as birth control technology, led to the sexual revolution which was predicated on the Reichian notion that sexual liberation

and hedonism are better principles to live by than oppression and inhibition. When there is no longer a God to guarantee morality it becomes possible and desirable to experiment with new rules for living. As Nietzsche predicted we had to revalue all our values.

## Rules and principles

On the whole we have sought, quite logically, to base our new rules on the principles provided by the facts. God has been replaced by human beings, by society and culture and it is these that now demand total obedience of us. The spiritual struggle of a growing person in the Western world is no longer defined by pleasing a god or a universal edict by tackling one's own inner turmoil. It is that of achieving maximum success and recognition in the eyes of our culture and society. It is not eternity but other people that are our horizon. From the moment we are born we begin to pick up the rules of the world around us, first through our families, but very soon through the input of television and other influences upon us, teaching us that the objective of life is to rise above the narrow confines of our own family and social group and reach for fortune, fame and triumph. No wonder it becomes so much harder to keep control over rebellious teenagers when the family is no longer a boundary they respect because their horizons reach so much farther. People who are redefined as instruments of survival rather than as instruments of God must assert themselves as much as possible instead of showing obedience as was demanded of them formerly. If only the fittest survive, we have to become as fit as is feasible. We have to make ourselves competitive, not only financially and professionally but also in the personal sphere: we have to be fit, attractive and happy. And yet we resent this.

But no matter how much we talk about it and find fault with the way of the world, blaming it on the media, broken families, the slackening of religion, drugs, sexual liberation and all the rest, it makes no difference where we seek the cause of all evil. The changes we have made cannot be undone and we have to learn to live with the new state of play. Most people continue to be rather confused about the world of today and find it hard to find meaning in it. We are confronted with the absurdity of existence and plunged into meaninglessness by being unhinged from our eternal northern star. So we seek to replace the old gods with new ones.

There are so many potential transcendental principles we can turn to. We can either put our faith in human beings, as in Humanism or Psychology, or we can work for society, as in Marxism or Socialism. We may of course postpone a decision and refer to ourselves as agnostic, which is a way of saying that we simply do not know or do not want to think about it. Or we can reject the idea of ideology all together and call ourselves a nihilist. On the whole this means we have not yet made up our minds as to where to put our

energy. Alternatively we may find the greatest advantage in using our energy to deconstruct or destruct, usually because we have not found a place for ourselves in the world. Nihilism is an increasingly popular stance for people in a post-modern world, with its corollaries of deconstructionism, scepticism and even anarchism or fanaticism. We are an increasingly cynical society and our children have less and less scope to dare to believe in transcendental principles, so that their vision often skips towards the pursuit of fame, fortune and happiness, which seem the most direct way of making room for oneself and rising above the clutter of the world. Once upon a time wisdom and maturity were symbols of virtues worth striving for, the prize of a life in tune with the higher purpose of human existence. Now youth, maximum enjoyment and fun are some of the most prized qualities of existence. Our undeclared value systems are riddled with short sightedness.

## False prophets

As Western ideology is progressively more based in reductionistic objectives our prophets are often those who work with the new technology that provides us with new hope and dreams. Either they devise gadgets or technologies that simplify our lives or they hold out the promise of making our lives happier, healthier and longer. In spite of all our new knowledge and understanding of the physical world, we are arguably more alienated from the purpose of human existence than ever before. We rarely think about it. We may argue about the meaning of life or what makes a person happy, but we do not pose the question of what it is all for. We have not managed to come up with a coherent, credible and morally satisfactory story to replace the old myths. Instead we have the reductionism of a materialistic myth which tells us of the mechanics of human existence and at best shows us how to profit from it most. Seemingly people do not even try to challenge the norm of materialistic meaning, but speak instead of simple values like 'having a good time', as if the world is a great party and life should be experienced as a special treat. It is not always clear what is meant by 'a good time' though. People are often a bit vague or mixed up about their own happiness. They may overrate their unhappiness by comparing it to the expectation that life should be good and easy. We may confuse wealth, youth and success with happiness, so that our idols become those people who have acquired most of these attributes all at once. They appear to us to be happy because they are living the idealized life, though in reality they seldom are, as they struggle with the strange contradictions between their outward image of achievement and their internal sense of fraud and a failure to thrive. They may already have discovered that the happiness they have striven for was nothing but fool's gold. The real thing remains elusive.

Therapists need to understand these philosophical problems, so as not just to go along with people's spiritual bankruptcy and confusion. To begin with it helps for therapists to familiarize themselves with the personal convictions and theories that form the backbone of a person's life. They need to understand not just their clients' cognitive beliefs, but much more importantly their ideological and spiritual beliefs. They need to be able to work with the fundamental ideas that underpin their clients' moral judgments and self-evaluation.

Of course this means familiarizing yourself with ideas from the different world religions and their moral systems to get some perspective on different ways of looking at life. But even more important is to find a personal connection with moral thinking that is non-dogmatic in nature and that can help you understand where other people are coming from. In this respect it is illuminating to go back beyond the roots of dominant Judeo-Christian or Islamic morality and to investigate alternative worldviews in a playful manner. This is when we notice the similarities between so many religious stories of creation and human purpose. Remarkably many of the world religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Taoism, but also Paganism, Zoroastrianism, Heathenism and Hellenism, are based on comparable conceptions of the origins of mankind and the roots of good and evil. Many African and Maori stories bear a resemblance to these as well.

If we want to go to the bedrock of Western accounts of the creation of morality we can do a lot worse than to reinvestigate the Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Germanic, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian myths that pre-date Judeo-Christian and Muslim belief systems. These early pagan beliefs are still with us to some extent, though very few people would say they take such religions seriously. This frees us to contemplate them, with enough familiarity and enough distance and without too much risk of offending or alienating anybody. When we examine the myth of creation of such religions we find that the old stories are more compatible with recent scientific accounts of the beginnings of mankind than we might expect, though they are a lot more imaginative. I shall illustrate this by briefly considering the relevance of the ancient Greek myth of creation.

## Prometheus and the creation of man

Greek mythology provides us with a standard myth of creation, which tells us that in the beginning there was nothing but chaos. Everything was confused and shapeless; nothing was clearly defined or differentiated. The earth, sea, and air were all mixed together. The earth was not solid, the sea was not fluid, and the air was not transparent yet. When earth, sea and heavens were separated from each other the world as we know it came into existence. None of this is contradictory with current evolutionary thinking or with most other religious views.

In Greek mythology (Graves, 1992) each of the basic elements that the world consists of was represented as a God. It is quite clear that much of this is to be taken as symbolism rather than as literal truth. So at the start there was simply Chaos, the god of disorder, who gave birth to Gaia, goddess of the earth, who in turn gave birth to Eros, the god of love. So the principle of love is there from the beginning mediating between chaos and earth. Out of this love are created other gods, such as Ouranos, god of the heavens and Oceanos, god of the seas and Rhea, goddess of the rivers. With her son Ouranos (sky), Gaia (earth) then gave birth to the Titans, gods of the underworld, of which the youngest was Chronos, god of time. Again it is very telling that time is such an important parameter.

After this the Titans, and others, gave birth to more specific gods and demi-gods, like Thanatos, god of death and Hypnos, god of sleep and Nemesis, god of anger and revenge. It is fascinating that there were therefore gods representing all the fundamental and significant human experiences, even those we might think of as negative. The same is true in Hinduism. Also, all of these negatives are related, which is interesting. Chronos, time, then fought his father Ouranos, the sky, and eventually this led to the separation of his mother, earth, and father, sky, who split up to never be one again. Here is an early example of the importance of the vagaries and conflicts of family life. It is because of this separation that Chronos, the god of time, became all powerful and got to dominate earth and sky. As is the case in daily life, it is time that does all the separating and dividing. This interesting metaphor of human living reminds us that it is time that human beings are made of and that dominates our lives, more than either earth or sky alone. Chronos then married his sister Rhea, the goddess of rivers (and flow), but ate all their children, for fear of being dethroned by them. Eventually the sixth child, Zeus (the living one), was rescued by his mother, who gave Chronos a stone to eat instead which made him regurgitate his other children (Hestia, Hera, Demeter, Hades and Poseidon), who promptly fled to mount Olympus with their brother Zeus. And so the conflict between family members is the essence of all human relations and sets the scene for the future. Rather reassuring. A mother saving her children from the father's wrath by stealth: heroic but tragic, since there will be a price to pay. Tragedy is constantly present in this story about human origins. And it gets even better.

For when the gods and Titans had settled down they created new creatures in the shape of animals of all sorts and shapes. But they wanted to create a nobler animal and so man was made. It was Prometheus, one of the Titans who had taken the side of the gods on Olympus, who shaped man out of earth mixed with water. Prometheus is the representative of labour and industry. Man was thus shaped out of clay and immediately linked to the notion of having to work for his existence and create things out of earth. He was also from the start endowed with more abilities than the other animals. Prometheus

made man in the image of the gods and gave him an upright stature. Unlike the animals that face downwards towards the earth, human beings face upwards towards the heavens. Such a lofty position and such high aspirations are certain to lead to trouble and the story of Pandora's Box is the story of the predictable and necessary downfall of human beings after they have become a little too proud. Let us note in passing that this downfall is not a punishment as is the expulsion from paradise in the bible, but rather an indispensable consequence of our desire to reach for the sky.

When Prometheus was given the task to create all the creatures, the animals as well as the human beings, he enlisted his brother Epimetheus to do all the hard work. Epimetheus did a good job, distributing all possible good qualities to the animals so that when he had finished there were none left. So when it came to making the human being he had run out of gifts and Prometheus had to help him out. Realizing that humans would be lacking so much by comparison to the other animals he decided to give them a special gift to defend themselves. This gift was that of fire, something which up to then had been strictly reserved for the gods.

Prometheus stole the fire from the sun, lighting his torch by it and bringing it down to mankind. Now people could make weapons and tools, cultivate the earth, defend themselves against animals and each other and warm their houses for comfort. This allowed human culture to develop and for human beings to learn crafts and sciences and arts that made them equal, or nearly equal, to the gods. Interestingly this is an exact illustration of the history of mankind, evolving its industry, science and technology. However, when Zeus realized what Prometheus had done, he was extremely angry. He had Hephaestus, the smith, shackle Prometheus to the side of a hill, high in the Caucasus Mountains. Prometheus hung there for centuries, having his liver pecked out every day by an eagle sent by Zeus. The torture was endless since the frosts at night would heal his wounds so that it could start all over again the next morning. In other words Prometheus was crucified so that human beings could benefit from the godly gift of fire. Yet they too were still to pay a price for their acquisition.

## The story of Pandora

Zeus dealt with the advantages that Prometheus had bestowed on man by giving these mortal beings a gift that would counteract and destroy their happiness and their success. He decided to give them woman. He figured that woman could easily undo all that Prometheus had done. A beautiful young girl was created, named Pandora. This name meant 'all is given'. Indeed she had all the advantages the gods were able to bestow on her. She had a

beautiful body and voice, given by Hephaestus. Athena gave her dexterity and inventiveness. Aphrodite put a spell of enchantment over her. Mercury gave her persuasiveness and so on and so forth until she was the most amazing creature on earth. Then Zeus gave Pandora to Epimetheus, Prometheus's brother. He could not resist temptation and took her in, even though he knew it would mean trouble.

Pandora brought a box with her, which contained a secret. She was told not to open this box. But one day she simply could not contain herself and in spite of Epimetheus's warning, she took the lid off. Immediately a multitude of problems, diseases and troubles escaped into the world. All the illnesses mankind knows suddenly spread all around. All the evil, hatred and spite that can affect human beings were distributed far and wide. Pandora was very upset about what she had set free and she put back the lid as quickly as she could. Then she realized that there was just one more thing in the box that she had not let out and that she could always keep in there safely. In this way it would always be preserved for human beings to rely on. Any person faced with the ills of mankind would still have this last quality to draw on. That last little but ever so important entity always at our disposal was: hope. It was the gift that makes human life liveable, even when everything seems hard and impossible. Hope is that which allows us to endure our fate, no matter how difficult it is.

## Relevance of the story to psychotherapy

It seems as if this story of creation provides us with a credible myth to live by or explain our human predicament with. No one would actually believe that the story is an accurate representation of something that happened historically (unlike the myths of creation of currently practised religions which are still taken literally by many) but it serves us well as an illustration of the human struggle and of everyday human reality. It also provides a blueprint for the adventure of human living, for the story clearly tells us that it is up to us to make the most of our gifts, whilst overcoming our troubles. Also these are usually bestowed on us because of our hubris: in this case our over confidence in our ingenuity. The story reminds us that there is always hope to guide us even in the worst of circumstances. This account of human living allows for lots of interpretations and is not to be taken as fact. It is therefore even compatible with an evolutionary notion of the origin of human life. It emphasizes human wit and human struggle as interacting with each other all the time and leading to progress when people find a way to outsmart their fate. Greek myths always emphasize how temporary such victories are since human tragedy and fate always catch up with us providing us with large obstacles and troubles on the way. This never ceases and human living is essentially

about finding ways of coping with these. This is true to some extent of biblical stories and of the Mahabharata as well of course and this is where religion and literature catch up with each other: such myths teach us about life and life is always an adventure full of conflict, adversity and strife that we somehow have to learn to master.

We may have evolved into a sophisticated culture but there are certainly no fewer difficulties and troubles to deal with now than ever before. The Pandora story, like the story of Adam and Eve, portrays the human challenge as that of labour in the face of multiple troubles that we have brought upon ourselves. It recognizes that the relations between men and women are often at the centre of the difficulties that arise. It also demonstrates that it is mankind's destiny to evolve further as our natural curiosity will continue to lead us into trouble. These are the kinds of emotional and ideological components that are badly missing from a purely 'scientific' account of what people are about. Therapeutic endeavours need to be based on some sort of narrative conception of the tasks that confront human beings on a daily basis. The notion that we are confronted with a multitude of problems that are not of our own making is quite useful. The idea that there is, at bottom, always this additional quality of persistence in human beings, based on hope, allowing us to overcome our trials and tribulations, is highly relevant to therapeutic culture.

## The function of hope

Hope most certainly is necessary for any form of psychotherapy to work. Perhaps it is mainly hope that inspires people in the early days of a therapeutic relationship. Giving hope to individuals who have none is a minimal objective of successful therapy. Psychotherapists who work with disenfranchised people will know that without hope there is no strength and no possibility that real work can be accomplished. Without hope there is no confidence. Confronted with the evils of the world people need a quiet place to recover and have the time to discover, in the reassurance of deep and supportive human contact, that new hope and confidence can be found. They need to gain new courage and inspiration to go forward.

This is not to say that hope giving and encouragement are the sole objectives of therapy. Hope is a necessary component of therapeutic work, but it is only a first step. We still need to deal squarely with the difficulties that people are struggling with. Nothing can be a substitute for the work of confrontation with reality. The evils of this world have to be faced directly in therapy in the same way in which the problems of one's own character have to be dealt with. With some clients therapists may need to be a bit like Pandora: opening the box to let the evils fly around freely, where they had been hidden and suppressed. With other clients therapists may need to enable the person to

make sense of all these difficulties and to organize and tame them. With others still all therapy can offer initially is hope and patience and the strength of endurance. Hope is reserved for the rock bottom of existence: it is only useful once we are faced with and are facing up to the human condition in its most raw state. Hope should never therefore be seen as a potential hiding place. Allowing clients to hope for a utopia where all their troubles will be over is not useful. That ideal place, where all is right with the world, is not going to come and does not exist. There is no paradise on earth and as far as we can tell there is none after this life either. If we create the illusion that there is an ultimate place of rapture that therapy can capture, we are not dealing with therapy but with wishful thinking.

Therapists have to be willing to address all the woes of the world even if they are unrelenting. For most of us it is hard to live resourcefully and well and much of the time we will feel weak or discouraged. Pascal said that human beings are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would be another form of madness. It is not really surprising that some of us cannot manage life at all. Even the best of us will encounter crises that get us down.

Kierkegaard had a pretty good idea about the extent of the problem and he accurately described the fundamental fears and anxieties, dreads and despairs that are part and parcel of being a human being. He also linked it with the notion of god forsakenness, something many of us live with everyday since we no longer believe in God.

*Deep within every human being there still lives the anxiety over the possibility of being alone in the world, forgotten by God, overlooked among the millions and millions in the enormous household. (Kierkegaard, 1999: A 363)*

When we can no longer believe in a god or gods and we dread the lonely human struggle, the need to find another source of inspiration is on.

## **Despair and its destructive effect on human beings**

So, if life is an inevitable sea of troubles and we can no longer turn to a god to save us, how are we to address problems in therapy? Are we to maximize the good things in life and let our clients aim to eliminate their problems and replace them with an enjoyment of what is pleasant? Is utopia to be found in such avoidant searches for good times? The answer is a resounding no. Though happiness seeking may work occasionally, it is not an enduring solution. For most of us it is not really an option at all. Truth and the good life are to be found not by avoiding life or by living in hiding, but rather by facing the

daily struggle of human existence with courage and determination. Human truth is ambiguous and hard earned. As Merleau Ponty (1945/1962) said, we need to find out how to give our lives meaning through the incarnate experience of being alive. It is only by committing ourselves to life and engaging with the actions required in combating the problems we encounter that we can hope to achieve a modicum of happiness. Kierkegaard knew a thing or two about this as well. He recommended the so called negatives of anxiety and despair as good starting points for learning to live, even though this leads to a paradoxical position.

*Consequently it is an infinite merit to be able to despair. And yet not only is it the greatest misfortune and misery actually to be in despair; no, it is ruin. (Kierkegaard, 1855/1941: 45)*

Kierkegaard ends up by distinguishing between two forms of despair: the despair of weakness and the despair of defiance. In the despair of weakness the person can see that they are capable of asserting selfhood, but they do not yet dare do so. In the despair of defiance the person is empty but trying to assert a self in spite of this and building castles in the air in order to do so. People go through both these experiences and can never assume themselves to be beyond despair, for as their circumstances change their capability for despair changes too. We would be fools to think ourselves above despair, as we would be fools to believe ourselves capable of always acting morally.

Frankl, through his experiences in concentration camps, discovered that people react in different ways to stress and despair and that they are capable of things they would not have thought themselves capable of in more favourable circumstances. We can surprise ourselves in both good and bad ways and should never assume we know how we will respond in new and harsher circumstances.

*In the living laboratories of the concentration camp, we watched comrades behaving like swine while others behaved like saints; man has both potentialities within himself. Which one he actualises depends on decision, not on conditions. (Frankl, 1967: 35)*

In the therapeutic arena we soon discover that all is not as it seems and that perfectly good people are capable of having awful experiences or doing horrible things, whereas people who seem bad on the outside can find perfectly good moral principles and abilities in themselves as well or suddenly come to great advantage in their lives. We are all capable of both extremes and we may fall to unexpected lows at times. Yet it is also within human capability to improve by learning from experience and by aiming for values and projects that are worthwhile. This is so in spite of a current, post-modern tendency to nihilistic evaluations of the world. Human beings are capable of progress.

They are also capable of change and perfectibility (though not perfection) and they can certainly improve their conditions. What is more: it is when they are tested and tried by circumstances that they show their mettle and that their resilience comes into its own. But they have to find a way to reflect on their experiences and conduct so that they can come to a deliberate decision about how they should live.

## Success is not important to freedom

Perhaps what people tend to lose track of these days is exactly that: the fact that they have to create their own meanings. They have to provide a *raison d'être* for themselves. They have to reclaim their freedom and find the best way of being they are capable of, whilst facing up to the worst. Freedom and success are not bound together. Those of us who are not afraid to fail and who are not afraid to suffer may be more free than those who think they are self-determining and in control because they constantly aim for success and live with the constant fear of failure. Sartre understood more about freedom than most and he said:

*to be free does not mean to obtain what one has wished (in the broad sense of choosing). In other words, success is not important to freedom. (Sartre, 1943/1956: 483)*

To remember this is in itself liberation. It means that people even in the worst conditions can aim for freedom, or at least for a small measure of freedom in their attitude. To make sense of their world and to organize it for themselves in accordance with their beliefs is a greater freedom than to achieve the artificial and overrated goods of twenty first century culture. Whilst many people find themselves in conditions of penury and need, few find themselves in a position to turn their difficulties to the good that Frankl was suggesting was within their reach. Frankl thought there were basically three ways of finding meaning in life (Frankl, 1967). He suggested that people find meaning in the experiential values of the good things we can take from the world, in the creative values of the good things we can contribute to the world and ultimately in the attitudinal values of the way in which we choose to deal with the inevitable suffering that will be our lot in life at certain times when neither positive experiences nor creativity are on the menu.

It is not therefore misfortune but only human despair about misfortunes, or rather the lack of willingness to stand up and be counted, that makes evil go unchallenged and makes misery permanent. When Pandora's Box is opened and the evil escapes, something or someone needs to draw our attention to the possibility of improvement and overcoming. It isn't a bad

bottom line for counsellors and therapists to build on. If as therapists we can understand, protect and enhance human freedom we may be able to play a significant part in helping people to find meaning where meaninglessness reigned before.

So perhaps we can now answer the question of whether it is right for therapists to be the guardians of human happiness or human contentment. The answer has got to be: only to the extent that therapists do so by addressing rather than by avoiding the realities of human living. But this may mean that the training and practice of therapists have to change considerably.

## Historical perspective

Why is the role of the therapist shifting so much? Szasz, in his 1961 book *The Myth of Mental Illness*, concluded that in our society we will increasingly need to seek help with our problems in living. He says:

*We are all students in the metaphorical school of life. Here none of us can afford to become discouraged or despairing. And yet, in this school, religious cosmologies, nationalistic myths, and lately psychiatric theories have more often functioned as obscurantist teachers misleading the student than as genuine clarifiers helping him to help himself. (Szasz, 1961: 273)*

Why is it then that people are turning to therapists to help them to live? If we want to set human endeavours in the context of their historical development, we find that Foucault's poignant analysis of the history of mental illness explains a lot.

Foucault's analysis of the archaeology of madness, which he sketched out in his history of insanity in the Age of Reason called *Madness and Civilization* (Foucault, 1965), gives us a handle on all this. He argued that madness is the limit of human reason in the same way in which death is the limit of human life. Both are sanctified and so both evoke horror and awe.

*As death is the limit of human life in the realm of time, madness is the limit in the realm of animality, and just as that has been sanctified by the death of Christ, madness, in its most bestial nature, has also been sanctified. (Foucault, 1965: 81)*

There is always a need for opposites to be taken into account if we are going to be serious about our approach of the human realities that tax us the most. Yet, madness itself, Foucault proposed, is a way for us to escape from the stark realities of everyday life. It is something akin to sleeping or if we prefer something like simply being mistaken. More poetically put by Foucault himself as:

*Madness is precisely at the point of contact between the oneiric and the erroneous (ibid.: 106). ... It is not reason diseased but reason dazzled. (ibid.: 108)*

This sums it up quite nicely. For this is what happens to most of us: we are not ill but dazed and dazzled by the complexity and confusion of living. But we do not have to respond to this by thinking of ourselves as emotionally or mentally deficient. Foucault gave us a good way of conceiving differently of mental illness in relation to different human ideologies, which deal with the issue of wellness and illness in different ways. Many are familiar with Foucault's archaeology of madness. He was one of the first people to pinpoint the ways in which society has approached the phenomenon of otherness and difference at different times. He recognized that each phase of history had different moral principles and beliefs, or as he put it: different eras had different epistemes, or ways in which knowledge and problems were approached.

Below is an overview of his views. I have added an extra dimension to his list to bring it up to date (van Deurzen and Arnold-Baker, 2005).

| Epistemes      |                |
|----------------|----------------|
| Middle Ages    | Exclusion      |
| Renaissance    | Resemblance    |
| Classical Age  | Representation |
| Modernity      | Self-reference |
| Post-modernity | Death of self  |
| Virtuality     | Inclusion      |

**Figure 1.3** Foucault's Epistemes

In the Middle Ages people were preoccupied with the exclusion of a middle way: things were either good or bad and if you did not fit into the picture of the church about what was good, you were expelled as an outsider. This age was represented graphically by Brueghel's painting of the ship of fools, where mad people were sent off to sea to die. In the Renaissance (seventeenth century) there was a revival of the ideals of godliness: people aimed to be as similar to the virtues of religion as they could. Being god-like was a good value to follow. In the Classical Age (eighteenth and early nineteenth century) representation took over: people now wanted to find the representations of good and bad in nature, in the outside world: body and mind got split and scientific thinking took over. It led to a denial of what human beings are. Then, in the Modern Age, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, man became self-absorbed and enamoured with human achievements. People started believing they could do anything and that they could overcome any problem. This was the age of self-reference which was overtaken by the era of post-modernity and the death of the self in the atomic age, when individuals no longer mattered in the same way and mankind for the first time became capable of destroying itself. Now

knowledge and values both suddenly became relative. Truth was no longer definitive and the new awareness that mankind could self-destruct or destroy the planet settled in. Everything had become temporary.

## An age of virtuality

This is no longer true for our culture however. I have argued that we are now moving on from post-modernity into the Age of Virtuality and I have written about this elsewhere (van Deurzen, 2000; Van Deurzen and Arnold-Baker, 2005). The Age of Virtuality is the age when mass communication takes over from individual person to person communication and where values are constantly replaced with new values and have to be re-valued as Nietzsche predicted more than 100 years ago. It is also an age when there is a renewed interest in happiness and well being and where we may be on the verge of rediscovering the importance of community on a wider scale than before. For our virtuality also reconnects us and brings us closer to more people than ever before.

Perhaps this will be the age where we finally get the hang of the difficult art of living. As mentioned above, in the Middle Ages mad people were excluded from their community, while in the Classical Age they were locked away as criminals and in the Modern Age treated medically. In the Post-Modern Age they were sent back into the community, which sometimes meant negligence of the real needs of the individual. It was the age of survival of the fittest. In the Age of Virtuality and the global village, where communication and electronic connections are beginning to take over and insert us into a new and wider network of virtual relationships, there are new challenges and new possibilities. We know more and are more aware of multiple possible interpretations of any person's experience. On the World Wide Web we can always find another person who has had a similar experience to ourselves and we can feel ourselves included in a larger more diverse community across the whole world. Of course this also means that we need to work harder at making sense of things if we are to keep it all together. For here we come back to Pandora and her box full of demons. Because what she has set free is more than we bargained for but it may also be the beginning of something promising.

## Dealing with the demons

As Pandora lets the demons loose from her box, we need to ensure that we shall not hide away from the consequences. We need to find sure ways of dealing with our demons, for we cannot avoid them. Carl Jung pointed out the need to face our own shadow. But before him Nietzsche spoke of accepting

our capacity for the daemonic. To span between beast and god is what he thought we should aim for. Rollo May (1969a) also spoke of the importance of the daemonic element of human nature and the need to befriend one's own daemonic or powerful elements.

Freud only recognized one demon until 1929: libido, the sexual instinct. This is not really surprising against a Victorian background and perhaps more importantly against a Judaeo-Christian background. The bible's story of the expulsion from Eden sets the tone. Sexuality is the demon that haunts us. Freud did like to refer to various other Greek myths, and tragedies, the stories of Oedipus and his father Laius and mother Jocaste for instance, and he was clearly taken with the notion of inevitable human tragedy as crucial learning points in our development. But it was only at the end of his career that he introduced that other crucial human demon: death.

Indeed we need to recognize that we cannot reduce human suffering to one single kind of experience. We have many devils in our lives. There are many and various concerns that preoccupy and bedevil human beings. Human living is complex and often unpredictable and as Jaspers (1951) has shown much of it is defined by limit situations, where we come to the edge of our existence and have to take a stance.

## Steady progress into the future

Heidegger was the philosopher who really put the ultimates and negatives at the centre of his thinking. He is the one who truly put death and human mortality on the philosophical map. He emphasized the significance of death as the point towards which human beings always progress through time (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Our mortality is that which defines us most definitely since from the moment we are born we are ready to die. We are creatures who essentially live in time and are always no longer what we were and not yet what we will be. Our ability to take our death into account defines the level of our aliveness, the intensity of our engagement with life. Heidegger coined the notion of constancy, which is the extent to which we keep our eyes on the objective and the reality of our loyalty to our own human existence. He also spoke of anticipatory resoluteness, which is the way in which we face up to the reality of dying. It is only when we are prepared to accept the way in which we die everyday that we can find the determination to claim our own life away from the influence of other people.

Tillich similarly emphasized how important it is to push ourselves to our limits and even beyond them. Tillich's idea of taking non-being into one's being is a most enlightening one. He argued that the more non-being or death or guilt or fate or failing we can face up to, the more we truly come to life.

Living is not about having an easy time. Far from it. It is about letting yourself be challenged to the maximum and rising to this challenge. It is to not fear the negative but instead take it to heart.

*Truth is found in the midst of struggle and destiny, not as Plato taught, in an unchanging beyond. (Tillich, 1966: 15)*

Human values have to be laboured for and this labour is worthwhile. It is what makes human life meaningful. The phase of Post-modernism is coming to the end of its useful life and is ready to be put behind us. Our children and grandchildren will be able to go beyond the nihilism and scepticism that they have inherited from the eighties, nineties and noughties. We need to open our eyes to the challenges and opportunities of the Age of Virtuality and move forward. We are now in a position to face up to human reality as never before and we need to let ourselves do this vigorously. We need to think about the new morality we are capable of.

## Implications for therapy

But we have still not clearly formulated what that new morality would be and that is precisely because it has to be discovered and created at each step of the way (de Beauvoir, 2000; Sartre, 1983/1992, 1992). It is neither founded on religious dogma nor simply on scientific data, though it takes these into account. It brings all sources of information and reflection together through philosophical insight and emotional and psychological understanding. It is about the capacity to reflect about moral issues rather than refer to a set moral code. It is what I have called mor-ability: the ability to create morality rather than follow morality. And where does this thinking about living take place? I would argue that it is often in the setting of counselling and therapy and certainly in the setting of counselling supervision and training. It is about taking human living seriously, not taking it for granted, but thinking about it carefully and deeply. It leads to an approach that is neither directive nor non-directive, but directional, purposeful and searching instead. It will be an interactional, reciprocal approach, in which human problems are debated. They are not treated medically nor treated prescriptively, not punished by the penal system nor condemned morally, but resolved and understood. This can only happen in the context of an open and challenging relationship, in dialogue with another human being, who is entirely and utterly available to this process.

For that is what is most needed when we are anxious or depressed: to find someone who understands our troubles and puts them in a human context. Psychotherapists then need to be prepared to encounter any or all of the demons

that Pandora or life has let out of the box rather than aim for a global state of happiness. They need to be capable of lucid and free thinking and helping others to think through their problems in living without imposing a doctrinaire view. This requires an openness and readiness to explore human existence without thinking in terms of the normal and the pathological and without aiming for happiness or cure. It means that therapists will have to get better acquainted with a philosophical exploration of what it means to live a good life. So this is what we shall turn our attention to in the next chapter.