

*Existential Child Therapy*

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in an  
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**Charlotte Buhler**

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## Author

Charlotte Buhler is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Beverly Hills, California, and is also Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Southern California Medical School (Emeritus).

## Therapy in an Existential Crisis

Charlotte Buhler

Philip, at the age of fifteen, was referred to me by his mother who was extremely bothered by his stuttering. She sought psychotherapy for Philip because two attempts to eliminate the stuttering through speech therapy had failed. The therapy with me continued for a period of two and one-half years involving seventy-three individual hours and forty-five group sessions.

When Philip arrived for his first meeting with me, he had no enthusiasm for therapy of any kind. He was uncertain, tentative, and even loath to get himself involved again in what appeared to be a futile goal. He was a medium-sized boy, with an athletic build, handsome, and unusually serious. He maintained a solemn, sad face during our first hour together, and his stuttering was severe.

Philip's disturbance, his dilemma in life may be viewed in two ways.<sup>1</sup> First, we shall consider briefly his emotional disturbance, problems of anxiety and depression, conflicts with hostile feelings and destructive impulses, patterns and habits that had taken root and had created a restricted and immature personality. These emotional factors were responsible for his stuttering and the other restraints and blocks to fulfillment of his

potentialities. The emotional disturbance had emerged and developed into full-fledged neurotic traits through a series of early traumatic experiences with his mother, his father, and his grandfather. Second, we shall view Philip's problems in the existential sense, in terms of his shock of discovering that his parents' values were far from healthy, far from good, far from decent and right, the shock of realizing the hypocrisy, distortion, fakery, and lying that surrounded him in his home. The first set of problems affected Philip's emotional attitudes toward himself, his parents, and others; the second were centered in his search for a philosophy of life based on healthy morality, on truth and honesty in human relations.

My main concern in this chapter is with the existential disturbance, its evolution and impact on Philip, his yearning to find a sense of decency and honesty in life. Briefly, however, I shall mention two extremely traumatic experiences that provided the immediate emotional shock and several critical incidents between Philip and his mother and father that significantly altered the entire course of Philip's development.

### **The Emotional Crisis**

The first moment to leave its powerful mark on Philip occurred during World War II, while Philip's father was away from home serving in the army. Philip was about two years of age at the time, and his grandfather lived with

him and his mother. A violent, stormy battle ensued between Philip's mother and his grandfather. The screaming became so intense and the gestures so threatening that Philip became terrified. He thought his mother was going to be killed when he saw his grandfather pummeling her. In spite of his great fear, he rushed to his mother's defense. It was a desperate, weak effort that left him completely shaken. While defending his mother in this futile, terrified way, he began to stutter. When Philip's mother described this incident, she said it was one of the most terrible experiences of her entire life. She cried bitterly as she recounted the vicious battle with her father. She felt that she had to shelter her father because he was an indigent man without a place in the world. She said he was erratic and easily provoked, disposed to frequent yelling and temper outbursts that severely disturbed Philip. She felt totally helpless and disabled in dealing with her father during his explosive and violent rages.

The second traumatic event in Philip's early childhood was of an entirely different nature. It occurred shortly after his father's return from service. His father too was given to temper outbursts, shouting in a loud, angry manner, and maintaining a completely dominant position in the family. In spite of these tendencies, it was not his father's aggressiveness which disturbed Philip, but rather it was the drastic and exclusive way in which he possessed Philip's mother, taking her away from him sharply and totally.

Sometime after Philip had come to know me and trust me, with deep emotional involvement, he spoke of the moment that had so markedly affected him. The incident occurred shortly after his father's return from the war.

My mom was standing in front of me; she had no clothes on; my father was lying on the bed and kept saying, "See how pretty your mom is."

I had walked into their room unexpectedly. I was very flushed. I could see her long hair and her smile; I looked away; I was afraid. I felt, even then, that my father made me feel foolish, that he wanted to. ... I felt it was wrong, that I was not supposed to see her like this and he asked me to see her. I felt he forced me to see her.

What happened then?

I felt he watched me and he watched her. I was up for ridicule at the time. *(Pause.)*

Why do you think he did it?

He thought I was too young to know about sex. I felt it was not right. He might have been trying to make it seem very natural, but actually he showed her off as his. He gave me the impression that he owned her. I had walked in and surprised them.

At that moment I accepted her as his too. They were going to sleep. I was asked if I wanted to sleep with them. I said, No, that I would sleep in my own room.

After that, I started splitting up from them and their things. This thought just came to me now, that this is what I did.

You felt that your father took your mother away from you and you were alone?

Yes, and I accepted it. I decided to be on my own and have no part of them.



This traumatic experience was the first memory that Philip had of his father. But there were many other moments when Philip felt that his father was trying to make a fool of him, when his father maintained a dominant position and made him feel little and inferior.

When he was four years old, he was told that Santa Claus would phone him and ask him what he wanted for Christmas. When he heard the voice on the phone that was supposed to be Santa Claus, he immediately recognized it as his uncle's voice. He answered spontaneously, "Hi! This is Uncle Bill." Unknowingly, Philip had spoiled the adult preparations and plans. His father became quite angry with him and spanked him. Another time, when his younger brother was told he would get a present from a fairy, Philip made fun of the idea and was again spanked.

I was often very mad at him. I thought I would leave home as soon as I could. Once I tried to get even with him. We were all in front of the house, when my father came up and kissed me and hugged me hard. "You broke my ribs," I screamed at him. Inside I was laughing. He was so worried that he had hurt me, he carried me into the house and put me to bed. I howled as if I was in agony, just to hurt him.

The feeling of being made a fool, of being small and inferior, of being cut-off and alone, the feeling that began with the naked scene, prevailed through all the childhood years and into his adolescence. Philip told how his father approached a discussion of sex when he was about twelve or thirteen.

We were sitting in the room watching television. He called me into the kitchen and stood there and just suddenly said, "Tell me all you know about women and sex." It floored me. I thought he was implying I had done something wrong. It knocked me for a loop. I didn't know what to do. Finally, I answered him, "I don't know what to say."

A week later, I had gone to work with him. We were in his office with his friends when one of them remarked that I was a nice person and polite. My father commented, "Last week I tried to teach him the facts of life, but he is too young." He made me feel odd, like a damn fool, as if he wanted to humiliate me. I hated him for a while.

Philip felt that his father had no respect for him. I asked whether his father treated his brother differently. Philip answered in the negative but said that his brother's response was different. His brother yelled back, battled it out with him. Philip believed that this was a better way of relating to his father. He remarked, "It seems my father likes that. He tells me I should stand up for my rights like Billy does. But I don't like to yell. Usually I leave the room and don't say anything."

Philip's relationship with his mother was also fraught with problems and conflicts. His mother constantly nagged him and made him feel obligated.

Every time I want to go some place, she comes up with, "After all I do for you, all you think about is your own pleasure."

What does she want you to do?

She likes me to stay home and sit with her and keep her company. She likes me to watch TV with her. I like to go out with my friends and have a good time.

Do you resent her when she makes you feel obligated?

In a way I do.

You have a conflict about it.

Yes, I feel guilty. She always makes me feel guilty.

Philip has never felt that his parents would stand by him if he ever got into a real jam. He came to believe that his father would insist that he handle any situation or problem by himself.

If I ever got into a bit of trouble, my father would never stick up for me.

You have to stand on your own.

Yes, he has always refused to help me when I am in a jam. Like when bigger kids used to pick on me, and I could not handle it myself.

You felt he deserted you.

That's how I often felt.

His mother also let him down on several occasions, destroying his belief in her and his trust in her. He recalled his mother promising to let him get braces for his teeth and then telling him later that money was so tight that she could not afford to get his teeth straightened. Yet shortly after this excuse, she bought a combination radio and record player. Through many experiences of this kind, both with his mother and his father, Philip increasingly refused their help, detached himself from them and their interests, and became more

and more withdrawn, unhappy, and lonely. From the age of eight, he found ways of earning an allowance so that he would not have to ask for money, so that he would not have to be dependent on his parents. In therapy, he admitted that he had been a martyr, that he had gone much too far in rejecting his parents and in attempting to make his own way in life.

Being so severely detached and so sharply independent, Philip could observe his parents' attitudes, he could see their values, their philosophy of life, with all the inconsistencies, contradictions, distortions, and hypocrisies. It is in this realm of an existential dilemma, of an existential crisis, that Philip found himself increasingly opposed to his parents' ways, his parents' ethics, morals, and values. It is in this realm that Philip stood his ground and began to evolve an identity of his own, emerging with a determined sense of honesty, independence, and solitude. It is in this realm that Philip stood out as a unique person in his family.

### **The Existential Crisis**

Philip's parents held to a philosophy of life that was essentially materialistic, characterized by opportunism, exploitation, and selfishness. Philip's father, the owner of a small business, lived in accordance with middle-class circumstances. To improve his business, he used dishonest methods and maneuvers. Occasionally, he discussed his business practices

with Philip, presumably as a way of showing his own cleverness and creating a closer relationship with his son. The consequence was somewhat disastrous. Philip was appalled by his father's machinations. Confiding the shrewd business practices merely reinforced the growing existential separation between Philip and his father.

Last winter my father told me that, because business was not good, he called on all the bosses in the area to fix prices. I knew this was dishonest. Why did he tell me about it? Maybe he was showing me how hard he was trying to succeed, but it only made me feel that he was a thief.

Perhaps, in confiding in you, he wanted to make you feel proud.

That kind of pride I can do without.

Why do you think it made you angry?

I always have set my ideals very high, never to lie and cheat. I don't want to. . . . At times, before, they have tried to influence me to do something dishonest, but fortunately I had a mind of my own. They often got mad at me. For example, I would not cheat regarding my age in order to pay reduced fares or lower entrance fees.

Did you ever discuss this conflict in values with them?

I repressed it. I did not discuss my feelings with them or with my friends. Suddenly now it comes to me why I had no respect for them.

How does your mother contribute to the unethical practices in your family?

My mom is a great one for criticizing. She can tear a person apart behind his back in two moments. She is a gossip. I try not to let it rub off on me. When I confront her with it, she says, "What, me a gossip? Not me." My parents put

on a false front all the time. Mother always smiles at me, talks sweetly in front of friends. No matter what kind of pest I have been, she calls me a dream child. Not to benefit me, but to let everyone know what a good parent she is. She has to keep a superiority complex no matter what the real truth is.

I get so mad at her at times. I get so frustrated. I hate the way she constantly talks about people. I never say something behind someone's back that I wouldn't say to his face.

My mother tells me that my aunt wears falsies. Why should she tell me that? Is she trying to build herself up more? When my aunt got a new car, right away they told me that she got the cash by sleeping with her boss. I like my aunt very much, yet they try to destroy my feeling for her.

They can hurt you even though you think you are independent of them.

Yes, I am hurt, because they are so dishonest and so false. They are my parents, after all. . . .

It seemed obvious to me that Philip's commitment to honesty was, in part, an expression of rebellion, and a way of feeling superior, a way of gaining a sense of self-esteem. It was his solution to the conflicts with his parents, to being rejected by them. Philip began to condemn their lies after he had been repeatedly hurt by them. Then he began to detach himself, prematurely, before any solid relationships had been built. The first incident that he recalled of being deeply hurt by dishonesty was the hypocrisy around Santa Claus. He remembers that his parents had told him always to tell the truth. Yet he was punished when he openly recognized his uncle's voice. In this experience, he learned that his parents had not been honest with him; he

learned that they expected him to pretend; he learned that they did not mean what they said. They wanted him to distort reality at their request and convenience.

I suggested that perhaps he would not be so condemning if he had felt they loved him more or if he had loved them more. He rejected this interpretation saying that for him truth was more important than love.

As we talked one day, Philip referred to a time in his life when he gave up his own values and decided to imitate some of his friends who practiced a dishonesty similar to his parents.

One time in the eighth grade I rebelled against my own standards. I went through a phase of stealing and lying. I saw my friends doing this. I suddenly thought, "It is no use having these standards; they do not help me in school or at home." I thought being different from my friends was of no use.

What happened to you?

It lasted a year, the stealing and lying. Then I began to feel very ashamed each time I stole, each time I lied. I felt it was wrong. I gave it up. From a very early age, I felt I would have to think over my life, I felt I would get no help from my parents. I had to think things through and raise myself and have my own standards.

When I first heard about Santa Claus, I thought it was a terrible lie. I thought about God also as a lie. With Santa Claus, I had never seen a man flying through the sky and I did not see God in the sky so how could he be. At the age of four or five, I refused to attend Sunday School, and I was spanked. I flatly refused. I had no faith in anything. I always felt that there is no hope.

What do you mean, "There is no hope"?

I always felt, that nobody helps you, you aren't given things from somewhere, you have to do it all by yourself.

In Philip's value system, honesty and independence ranked at the top. Undoubtedly these values had their origin in the negative identification with his parents, when he learned to take an opposite stand. The question is, why did Philip choose honesty as the basis of his negative identification? In numerous experiences, I have found that the selection for identification is usually in the direction of an interest or talent which the child feels emerging and growing from within. In other words, the identification takes place in the direction of self-realization. For Philip, the choice of honesty and independence was not only a reaction to the feeling of being unloved and rejected by parents who were not ethical and free, but also in these values he could experience solitude and loneliness and grow from his own inner resources.

Philip's decision to detach himself from his home atmosphere, from his parents, who hurt and rejected him, was the first step in the direction of independence. Independence and honesty provided the ground he chose to stand on. There is every indication in his background that the choice was his own. At thirteen, when he temporarily resorted to lying and stealing for recognition and status, he became aware that this was not his way, that this was not his kind of life. Behaving dishonestly and unethically made him feel



“sick inside.” He reaffirmed the choice he had made a decade before, that independence and honesty were consistent with his real self, were the only satisfying paths to self-actualization.

Even, in the later phase of therapy, when Philip had worked through the conflicts and problems of his early childhood, when he had learned to accept and appreciate his parents, when he realized that they did have his interests at heart, Philip was still significantly separated from them in the existential sphere. He now could live with them differently in the emotional sense but the existential breach remained the same. He experienced a feeling of love for his parents, but he could not approve of their values, standards, and concepts of life, nor did he wish to identify with them. In contrast, his relationship with me was not based on love, but rather it was based on trust and a belief in my dependability and in my honesty. He considered me a friend. Philip’s appreciation of honesty gave our relationship its foundation. In my third meeting with him, he told me he had no confidence in his parents. I asked him if there was anyone he trusted. He answered, “I don’t confide in anyone; I have a great distrust of people, always have had a distrust.” I pointed out that he had already expressed a number of his deep feelings to me. He explained and justified this by saying that he answered my questions and told me about himself because it was the only way I could help him. But, in my fourteenth hour with Philip, he reversed the earlier expressed attitude. He told me he liked me and that he could talk freely and openly with me. In my twenty-first

hour with him, he said he had never before expressed his real feelings to anyone and that he was just beginning to express his feelings with friends. He said he trusted me and could speak to me of his deepest concerns.

While honesty as a value was the cornerstone of our relationship and created a bond between us, I felt that decisive for Philip's existential awareness was a clarification of his commitment to independence as a value. The critical experience in which his father pointedly took his mother away from him initiated in Philip a yearning for independence and detachment. On that day, Philip began to separate himself from his parents. As a solution to the oedipal conflict, certain aspects of the independence ideal reflected their neurotic origins. For example, Philip often described himself as emotionally invulnerable (*as a concomitant of the independence value*), saying, "I told myself over and over again, 'I don't care and I don't feel.' " His mother told Philip he should confide in her and reveal his feelings to her. But Philip did not wish to step out of his private world.

My mother feels I am ungrateful. She thinks I should tell her my thoughts and feelings. But I have my own ideals and goals, which are different from hers. She feels I am too independent.

I never want to lean on people. I never want to rely on them. If I want something, I go out and work for it. I do not sit around wishing I had it. I do not ask them for it. I guess it comes back to the fact that I don't trust my parents.

They have made you feel that strings are attached.

That's putting it well. . . .

Does your brother react in the same way? Does he feel indebted?

He does not seem to resent it.

He is more trusting and confiding?

Yes, he is.

But your feeling is: "You can't touch me."

In a way, yes. I have always liked to be on my own, completely on my own.

That's pretty hard at times.

It is.

Another facet of his stand for independence expressed itself in Philip's reaction to authority. He frequently stated his dislike for authority. He spoke in a bitter way about teachers who constantly gave orders, saying he did not like being told what to do, saying that he was afraid of the power of the teacher, that for his part he saw his teachers as people who flaunted their authority and, as far as he was concerned, they could all drop dead.

The independence ideal also had its constructive side. Philip could envision his future, could take the initiative in evolving new directions, could determine what he wanted to do.

"I know just what I want to be. I want to be a photographer, and I think

I'll be a good one. I don't know how to break into the field of photography, but I'd like to be a free lancer. That's a great challenge, to try all sorts of jobs, shooting pictures from an airplane, going off on dangerous assignments, taking pictures of pretty girls. In this field, I can be my own boss, and I like being my own boss."

After we had started our second year of therapy together, Philip gave me an opportunity to explore more deeply into his attitude toward independence. I began more frequently to use the technique that I call "constructive exploration." I use this technique to complement the initial "analytic exploration" by bringing up certain questions for consideration. The questions are not "suggestive" in terms of any "ought." I do not "influence" a patient's choice of values, as some critics felt. My questions are meant to open new vistas on aspects of life that the patient had not considered or mentioned. This is done sparingly and with careful timing.

The questions of the constructive exploration concern the outlook on the future. They are reminders of the problem of values, goals, and purposes.

With Philip, the occasion for this arose when he declared one day he wanted to discuss his ideas about independence.

I like to talk about my independence, how I got this attitude, where it came from. I can remember when my mom gave me various gifts, Christmas or birthday or other gifts. Each time, there was an argument, and I was always made to

feel obligated. Their attitude seemed to be, "Look at all we have done for you." So when she gave me something, it made me mad. Ever since I was sixteen, I did not take one cent from them. I made it myself. If she gave me a present, I disliked it. I would never use it. An example of how they treated me was my car. When I was sixteen, they chipped in \$900 and I had \$400. I got the car, but then they said I couldn't drive it till I was seventeen. They stalled and said it was my grades, then they said it was my insurance. I worried so, I got sick over it. When I first went for my license, Mother said the motor vehicle bureau would not let a boy my age pass. But I passed with 98 or 99. All through the years, I developed the idea that, if I wanted something, I had to get it myself.

The car has stood there since we bought it. I cleaned it and waxed it four times a month. I was not allowed to drive it myself. They always talked around things. They never gave me a straight answer. They often lied to me. I feel I don't want their help at all. I refuse their help. I am through. I quit. My parents try to get close to me and get me to confide in them. I completely reject them. When they come to me and tell me what to do and try to run my life a certain way, there is a showdown, revenge, and then I sleep with a smile on my face. Right now I am extremely happy, not lonely as I would be with them. Coming here gives me confidence. It has changed my way of thinking and my attitudes.

You say therapy changed your way of thinking, how?

Well, I understand myself much better. I see all these things clearly and less emotionally.

But in what way is your attitude changed?

I criticize myself now. I begin to understand them better.

But you still want to remain lonely and independent?

Yes, absolutely.

Then what do you want to use this independence for?

Well, I will have my career, my own family and stand on my own.

But what do you want to live for? Do you have any goals?

I have not thought about that. I thought I would just live to be a good photographer.

Philip gradually began to include the significance of relatedness in his list of important values. During this period, he met a girl, whom he came to respect and love. He spoke of their life together, their “wonderful parties at the beach” and joyous activities. For the first time, Philip was enjoying physical closeness, feeling the joy of love. “It seems I am melting,” he told me, “I am undergoing a change.” He spoke of the future, of the ideal qualities in a girl, of marriage. He began to review once more his relations in his family. He began to see that in many instances his mother and father expressed their love for him, but he had pushed them away. He began to recognize that they really cared for him in their own way, but he still held them responsible for his need to struggle to be valued as a person with talents and potentialities.

They don't take me seriously. They treat me as if I was gliding along in life. They don't acknowledge that I am fighting to make something out of myself. They refuse to acknowledge me as a person. I am still treated as a kid. Perhaps one day, if I am successful, they will acknowledge me. I want recognition, but I want to do good work anyway.

Philip gradually expanded his philosophy of life. The group meetings were especially helpful in this respect. They provided an opportunity to discuss and explore with others existential values, such as freedom, honesty,

choice, responsibility, love, and to clarify problems with reference to the individual and society.

Philip spoke of his changed views and values.

A few friends and I talk recently a lot about life, what it is all about. I try to speak my share.

I think you mean, you want to contribute to the efforts of your group; perhaps also to those of the community as we have recently discussed in the group.

I think this is what I mean. My old view about life was that it concerned only me, that it was just what I made of it myself. Now I think of life as working within society and doing my share. My views were very one-sided and selfish. Now they are more open. There has been a change in my sense of values. Coming here has changed my attitude toward life, and strengthened me, and will make me a much finer man and father. Being a good man and contributing to society is my highest value. My second value is progress in school. My third value is finding the right girl. My fourth value is independence. It no longer seems so important. Quite a switch!

Previous to therapy, I thought of life as two things. If I was happy, I had a good life; and if I was sad, I had a bad life. Now I think of life, not as being happy or sad, but in terms of knowledge. This I believe is the key of life. I believe in choosing a goal and working very hard to reach this goal, therefore, bettering yourself. By doing this, you also better mankind, making life better for everyone. I don't think it is important what goal you choose as long as it is a constructive one. To have something to work for and something to believe in, and to achieve that feeling of accomplishment are some of the greatest goals in life.

Philip's ideas about contributing to society, having constructive goals, and working for something he believed in, had been developed in group

discussions on what made life worthwhile. Philip was the youngest member of this group and got several of these ideas from others. But the goals of working hard, of bettering himself and making life better for everyone were strictly his own.

We have seen how Philip lived and grew up, torn between fear and rebellion, fighting against hostility and guilt. While emotionally dependent and continuously on the defensive, Philip struggled from his early childhood for existential independence. Honesty and personal independence were his two highest values. He chose honesty in negative identification with his parents. And he chose independence as an ideal of his own.

The psychotherapy of this boy was conducted with two goals in mind. The first was to explore analytically the dynamics of the emotional disturbance. The second was to enhance the values that Philip had set up for himself and to explore constructively their developmental potentials. As a result, Philip is being enabled to grow far beyond the narrow world of his family. His speech is improving, and he is moving toward a wider and freer outlook on life with constructive ideas and values consistent with his own sense of self and self-realization.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> The approach is discussed in detail in Charlotte Buhler, *Values in Psychotherapy* (New York: Free



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