

Anthony Chivetta

Piquet

The Exstential Imagination

December 4, 2007

### The Existential Crisis: Grounding Identity

We are grounded to the reality of life by our sense of self, our sense of being. Our *understanding of the self*, of ourself, controls the way we act and perceive. And, when this understanding of the self is questioned it can be deeply troubling. This is most easily seen in what has been popularly termed the *existential crisis*, the struggle to recreate self-understanding after a deeply troubling event. Existential crises begin with a period of little self-understanding followed by a traumatic event (which we will call the *existential catalyst*) that causes the process of questioning. The crises concludes with a new attachment to one's understanding of self and reality.<sup>1</sup> This process can clearly be seen in 'existential' literature such as Camus' *The Stranger*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, or Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*.

#### Self Schemata

Let us begin with a short discussion with the psychology of self-understanding. Social psychologists would translate our idea of self-understanding into the concept of a

---

<sup>1</sup>Many would attempt to call this process liminal, and in some cases existential crisis do represent liminal processes. However, a liminal process requires a descent into chaos, and while that fits our examples here, the 'traumatic event' in an existential crisis need not always cause a descent—positive, but self-understanding shattering events can also cause existential crises. Furthermore, existential crises, unlike liminal processes, need not end positively.

*self-schema.*

A self-schema consists of traits and behaviors with which the person has real experience, and to which the person has acquired a meaningful attachment as part of his/her self-definition. (Moskowitz 159)

The incredible power of events to shape our self-schema comes from this fact, that our self-schema is *based* on actual experiences (as opposed to it being the result of introspective thought, or feedback from other individuals). This is what allows existential catalysts to have such a profound effect on people.

Self-schemata will allow people to make judgements about schema-relevant behavior or attributes fairly easily and quickly, to make predictions about future behavior relevant to that attribute or behavior fairly readily and accurately, and to resist discovering information about themselves that is contrary to that which their self-schemata would suggest to be true.

...

People with self-schemata are resistant to receiving information that is counterschematic.

...

Individuals are faster to detect and respond so schema-relevant information, and they are more likely to reject and see as invalid information that is inconsistent with their existing schemata. (Moskowitz 160)

The idea that we avoid that which is contrary to our self-schema is what gives power to existential catalysts. Their magnitude makes them unavoidable which when combine with their *counterschematic* nature creates cognitive dissidence<sup>2</sup>. This cognitive dissidence is what forms our central, disoriented phase of the existential crisis.

The overreaching importance of self-schemata can be seen in what Rogers, Kuiper, and Kirker noted the following in their paper “Self-reference and the encoding of personal information” (1977, Social Psychology):

The central aspect of self-reference is that the self acts as a background or setting against which incoming data are interpreted or coded. This process involves an interaction between the previous experiences of the individual (in

---

<sup>2</sup>*Cognitive dissidence*, despite its important role in existential crises, is beyond the scope of our current digression. However, they are a very interesting and important topic and the author strongly encourages additional future exploration into the topic

the form of the abstract structure of self) and the incoming materials.  
(Moskowitz 160)

The idea that self-schemata provide the basis from which we perceive is what gives them the power to both create and resolve the existential crisis. As a new self-schema is established after the existential catalyst, it provides the ground for the recovery phase where a new grounding in the world is established.

### **The Stranger**

In “Out of his way”, my essay on Camus’ *The Stranger*, I classified Meursault’s relationship with the absurdity of life into three phases “thoughtless acceptance, questioning, and thoughtful acceptance.” These three phases provide much of the groundwork for classifying Meursault’s arc as an existential crisis, with his murder serving as the existential catalyst.

We begin with Meursault’s “thoughtless acceptance” representing his loose coupling with reality and weakly defined self-understanding. His detachment from his everyday life provides a lack of traits or behaviors with “meaningful attachment” for Meursault, creating a weak self-schema.

Out of this detachment comes our existential catalyst, Meursault’s murder and (more importantly) jailing and trial. While Meursault does not have a strong self-schema, the idea of murder runs highly contrary to it, creating internal chaos for Meursault.

On my way out I was even going to shake his hand, but just in time, I remembered that I had killed a man (Camus 64)

In Meursault’s initial difficulty in coming to terms with the fact that he had committed murder, we see that murder is counterschematic for Meursault. This later serves to exacerbate the effects of his jailing and trial on him.

Through the course of Meursault’s incarceration we see the period of ‘questioning’ as I described in “Out of his way.” Meursault’s questioning is the product of his cognitive

dissidence as he attempts to merge his existential catalyst with his self-schema. His new reflective attitude is characteristic of his coming to a new understanding of self.

Meursault's final stage, the resolution of his crisis, comes when he is able to accept the absurdity of the world into his understanding of the world and self. He begins to identify with the world, merging his internal self-schema and his external existence in the world.

## Native Son

At the beginning of *Native Son* we find Bigger as an individual disconnected from the world at large. Bigger's lack of opportunity for meaningful individual experiences in his life can be easily seen in his lack of privacy. For example, he must turn around every morning so his mother and sister can dress. This lack of individual experiences gives Bigger little from which to develop a self-schema. We can see this initial lack of identity most clearly in Bigger's reaction to his murder.

He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him.

His crime seemed natural; he had felt that all his life had been leading to something like this. It was no longer a matter of dumb wonder as to what would happen to him and his black skin; he knew now. The hidden meaning of his life—a meaning which others did not see and which he had always tried to hide—had spilled out. No; it was no accident, and he would never say that it was. (Wright 106)

If we take “[something] that others could not take from him” to mean a self-schematic experience we see here the primary difference between Bigger the murderer and pre-murder Bigger, namely the existence of “something that was all his own.”<sup>3</sup> Bigger was once *identity-less* but now “the hidden meaning of his life . . . had spilled out”.

Bigger embraces this sudden and (in terms of the quality of Bigger's self understanding) positive change making it his own. He not only accepts this new part of his

---

<sup>3</sup>One could view the pre-murder Bigger as infantilized.

self-schema but redefines his perspective based on it, retroactively basing his previous self on it.

Bigger also uses it, just as the theory of self-schemata would have him, to determine his future actions.

But of the whole business there was one angle that bothered him; he should have gotten more money out of it; he should have *planned* it. He had acted too hastily and accidentally. Next time things would be much different; he would plan and arrange so that he would have money enough to keep him a long time. (Wright 129)

Bigger accidental actions have become morphed by their self-schematic nature into his intents. We can see Bigger attempt to protect his new self understanding from the fact that his murder was accidental through compensation, the fantasy of a ‘next time’.

All his life he had been most alive, most himself when he had felt things hard enough to fight for them; and now here in this cell he felt more than ever the hard central core of what he had lived. As the white mountain had once loomed over him, so now the black wall of death loomed closer with each fleeting hour. But he could not strike out blindly now; death was a different and bigger adventure. (Wright 419)

As Bigger’s ‘high’ from his new self-understanding begins to subside we see him come to grips again with the world around him. While bigger still feels the part of himself that was defined by murder — “the hard central core of what he had lived” — and views that as a central part of himself, he has now shifted his self understanding to include a wider range of his reality — “the black wall of death” — and what is happening to him presently. He is no longer chained to defining himself to the past, to his existential catalyst.

“I know I’m going to get it. I’m going to die. Well, that’s all right now. But really I never wanted to hurt nobody. That’s the truth, Mr. Max. I hurt folks ’cause I felt I had to; that’s all. They was crowding me too close; they wouldn’t give me no room. . . . I was always wanting something and I was feeling that nobody would let me have it. So I fought ’em. I thought they was hard and I acted hard. . . . But I ain’t hard, Mr. Max. I ain’t hard even a little bit. . . (Wright 425)

Bigger concludes the process of recollecting himself by acknowledging the significance but not entirely self-defining aspect of his murder. He comes to accept the position of his murder in the grand scheme of his life. Furthermore, he begins to gain a self-understanding that allows him to truly grasp the reasons for his murder, *in terms of self-schematic concepts*.

### **The Adding Machine**

The third and final piece we will look at is *The Adding Machine* by Elmer Rice. *The Adding Machine* is of special interest to us because rather than end with a deeper connection to the self and world, the protagonist, Zero, rejects the opportunity to modify his self-schema in response to his existential catalyst and lapses back into his original state. This, however, does not make Zero's experience any less of an existential crisis, only a less productive one.

Zero begins the play having worked 25 years at the same job, adding figures, which he does mindlessly and with little self-reflection. During that time he is portrayed as taking little initiative, resulting in him remaining at the same desk for such a long time.

After (uncharacteristically) killing his boss, Zero is forced to (briefly) reflect as he tries to reconcile the fact that he killed his boss with his self-schematic passivity.

An' all of a sudden this big black guy steps right on my foot. It was lucky for him I didn't have a gun on me. I'd of killed him sure, *I guess*. I guess he couldn't help it all right on account of the crowd, but a black man's got no right to step on a white man's foot. I told him where he got off all right. But that didn't hurt nobody, either. I'm a pretty steady guy, you gotta admit that. Twenty-five years in one job an' never missed a day. (Rice 58, emphasis added)

During his monologue in court, Zero reflects on his own feelings and attitudes. We see him here claim that he would have killed a man on the subway (due to his new self schema), but he indicates his insecurity with this new aggression ("I guess") as it is against his original understanding of self.

In our first two texts the resolution of the protagonists cognitive dissidence resulted in a self understanding that included the existential catalyst.

The Fixer: What would you do if I gave you another chance?  
Zero: Well – first thing I'd go out and look for a job.  
The Fixer: Adding figures?  
Zero: Well – I ain't young enough to take up somethin' new.  
The Fixer: Put the skids under him boys, and make it snappy. (Rice Act 4.5)

Here, however, we see Zero demonstrate a self-schema that does not include his new found aggression and activity. When given the opportunity to 'correct' for his previous connection to the world (or, lack thereof), he does not take advantage of it, leaving his one action (that of murder) as his only connection to the world around him.

Charles: How long have you been here?  
Zero: Jes' twenty-five years. Three hundred months, ninety-one hundred and thirty-one days, one hundred thirty six thousand—  
Charles: That'll do! That'll do!  
Zero: I ain't missed a day, not an hour, not a minute. Look at all I got done.  
Charles: It's time to quit.  
...  
Zero: I did my bit, didn't I? Fortyfive years of it. Twenty-five years in the store. Then the boss canned me and I knocked him out cold. I guess you ain't heard about that —  
Charles: I know all about that. But what's that got to do with it?  
Zero: Well, I done my bit, didn't I? That oughta let me out.  
Charles: So you think you're all through, do you?  
Zero: Sure I do. I did the best I could while I was there and then I passed out. And now I'm sittin' pretty here. (Rice 127)

Perhaps even more troubling is the idea that Zero relapses into exactly the same situation and environment as before his existential crisis. While the other characters we examined developed new understandings of self and world, Zero remains unchanged and expresses no interest in changing.

This brings us to the all important question: Why? Why does zero remain the same? What about him causes him to resolve his cognitive dissidence by disregarding entirely his crisis (and the events causing it)? While Zero does acknowledge the events, he does not make them self schematic. What is the critical difference between Zero and Bigger or Meursault that allows them to learn and grow from their existential crisis, but not him?

## Works Cited

Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. New York: Vintage books, 1988

Moskowitz, Gordon B. *Social Cognition: Understanding Self and Others*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2005

Rice, Elmer L. *The Adding Machine*. London: Samuel French, Inc., 1928

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York: Perennial Classics, 1998