

The Society for Existential Analysis

# Hermeneutic Circular

APRIL  
2018



**NEW FRAMEWORK  
FOR CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY**  
**NARCISSISM: BECAUSE YOU'RE WORTH IT**  
**THERAPY BY PHONE**

# POWER, THREAT AND MEANING: AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY?

BY ADAM KNOWLES



A Kuhnian paradigm shift is underway in Clinical Psychology, perhaps an existential crisis. Dr Lucy Johnstone and others in the Division of Clinical Psychology of the British Psychological Society (BPS) are touring the country to launch the *Power Threat Meaning Framework*.

Five years in the making, the main document is 414 pages long (139 for the overview), covering the benefits and shortcomings of psychiatric diagnosis, and recommendations for a new model. The framework is meant to provoke important conversations about longstanding problems.

This could be the biggest shake-up of Clinical Psychology in my lifetime. It is an innovative act of creative disruption that will affect psychiatry, psychology and psychotherapy.

The Chair of UKCP Martin Pollecoff attended the London launch a few weeks ago and provided a supportive written response online. That writing itself prompted a brief response from Digby Tatum, and a further thoughtful article from UKCP Chief Executive, Professor Sarah Niblock.

I want to make a case for lending it our attention within the existential community.

## What it says

The framework provides a critique and alternative to psychiatric diagnosis for Clinical Psychologists. It encourages them to ask not 'what is wrong with you?' but 'what has happened to you?'

It addresses 'social imbalances not chemical imbalances'. It does this via a model that examines the power and the misuse of power operating in people's lives, their response to that power (how it threatens them), the meaning they make of that and what they had to do to survive.

It has something in common with narrative therapy, with the client describing their experience (perhaps 'sedimented beliefs') and the therapist helping edit the story to generate new possibilities. It brings with it the prospect of psychiatric drugs being labelled not as mechanical remedies to elusive, subjectively-diagnosed concepts, for example 'anti-depressant' or 'anti-psychotic', but by what they do, for example 'stimulant' or 'sedative'.

The framework does not exclude the biological aspects of people's problems but takes a broader biopsychosocial (I would add – spiritual) approach which it considers underplayed by

DSM categories. I understand that this better represents what Clinical Psychologists do, and is, therefore, the theory catching up with the practice.

Dr Johnstone is an inspirational figure, inclined to action. She has taken a view as Ford famously did with cars, that it is not faster horses that people need, but something else entirely.

A few years ago, the BPS signed an 'open letter to the DSM-5', alongside many other national psychological associations. It says, 'even after "the decade of the brain," not one biological marker ("biomarker") can reliably substantiate a DSM diagnostic category'.

What Szasz said decades ago remains valid and apt. Diagnosis is one language, one framework, and one sense-making metaphor among many. It highlights certain things while hiding others. Its rightful place is something optional and not forced upon people without their informed consent. It has taken me five years of committed study to even begin to feel informed.

## The existential critique

Kuhn himself used Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit illustration of figure/ground to encourage us to look again at the phenomena in front of us. Paradigm shifts are what, as existential psychotherapists, we do.

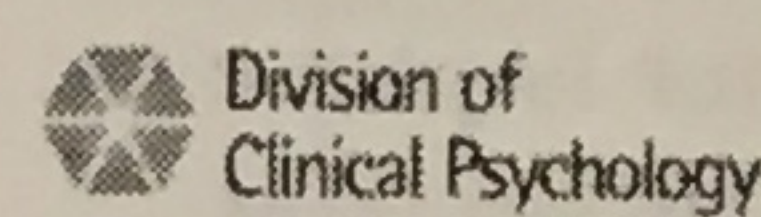
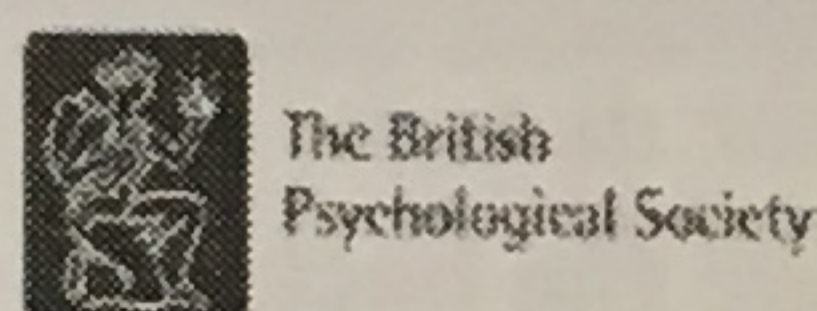
Wittgenstein encourages us to examine language. An existential question arises: if Clinical Psychology is no longer about what is wrong with you and acknowledges competing subjectivities rather than the objective, scientific claim of diagnosis, then won't it need to change its name?

In one sense, existential psychotherapy could be seen as a framework about power, threat and meaning. In terms of power, I ask clients who is constraining their situation, what is influencing what and whose interpretation is ruling via what mechanisms.

In terms of threat, I ask about my client's responses to that power: fighting, fleeing or freezing, taking up a position in a sadomasochistic dyad, or their position in the persecutor-victim-rescuer triad.

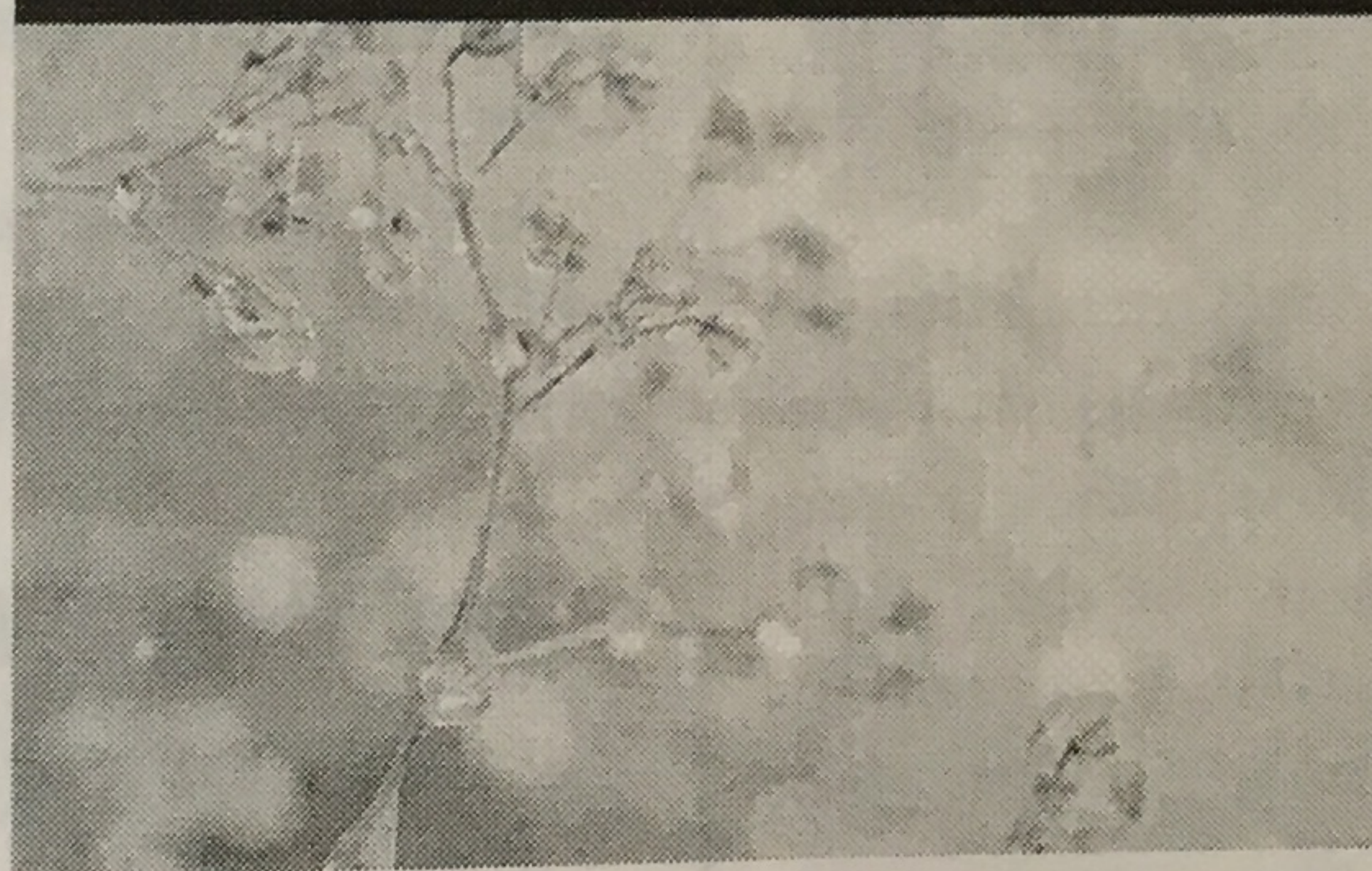
As for meaning, that's surely our specialist subject as existentialists. Humans seem predisposed to find meaning, whether in tea leaves, words or other people. This is always in

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## The Power Threat Meaning Framework

Towards the identification of patterns in emotional distress, unusual experiences and troubled or troubling behaviour, as an alternative to functional psychiatric diagnosis



## POWER, THREAT AND MEANING

CONTINUED

tension with the abyss, the nothing in our middle. We help our clients as they navigate this.

In another sense, existentialism is an anti-framework framework, though not value-less or content-free. In its freedom of and from frameworks, existentialism has something to offer those seeking to move from one framework to another.

Existentialism is a persistently frustrating, yet rewarding, process of grasping for the ungraspable. It is about becoming more certain of the uncertainty of previous certainties, including this one.

As Clinical Psychology re-examines its own prior certainties and dares ask itself again if it's a duck or a rabbit, let's lend our voice and support for doing such a thing. Then encourage it to look again and again, next to see what a paradigm of power, threat and meaning hides.

### Weathering the #twitterstorm

I first heard about the launch of the *Power Threat Meaning Framework* on Twitter. Images of the launch slides and published quotes generated personal attacks, apologies, clarifications and withdrawals, though perhaps no more than Twitter is prone to. This #TwitterStorm continues, which I follow with interest.

### Existentialism feels like a natural home for outsiders, the ones that zig when others zag

My comments have elicited replies from Dr Johnstone, suspicion from some 'service users' and strong emotions from those opposed to it. Laingian interpersonal knots become tangled at internet speed.

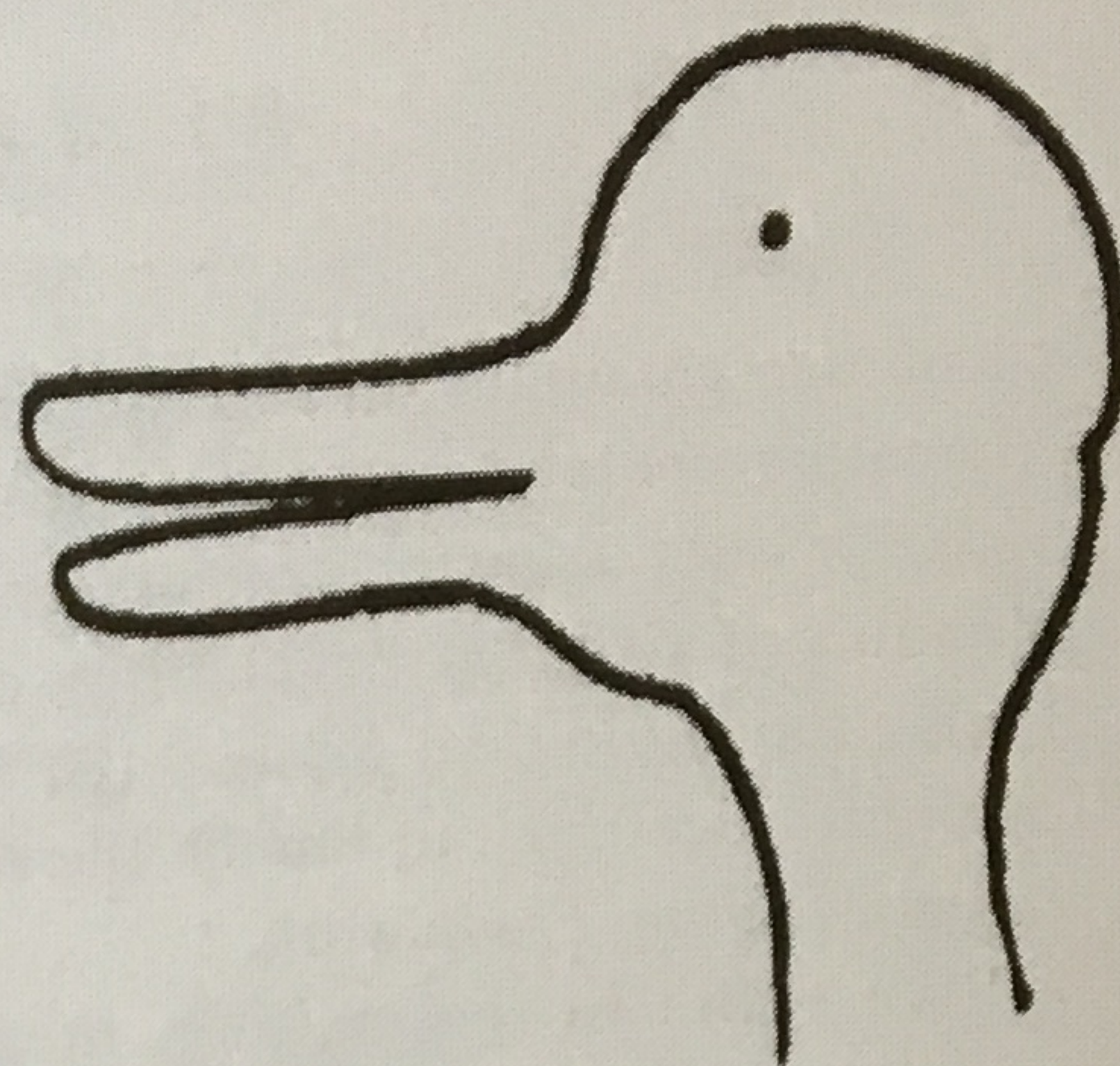
There is a dynamic perceived of 'professionals' doing things to the 'service users' without consultation or permission, even though what those professionals are trying to do with their power is create a way to confront imbalances of power. The sharing of the documents simultaneously to both professional and public audiences has caused great unease, yet I struggle to imagine anything else being possible in 2018.

One thing existentialism does is encourage me to closely integrate my personal and professional aspects. I want to treat everyone with respect, dignity and compassion, not because I'm a professional but because it's the decent thing to do. This has stood me in good stead on Twitter but feels at odds with the discourse otherwise underway.

This article may itself be shared beyond the mailing list of the *Hermeneutic Circular*. I'm not looking forward to explaining myself to many sceptical onlookers. At the same time, I'm happy to be naked and dangerous.

### What next?

As I sit in my private practice in London with its IKEA chairs, seeing only clients that can afford it, secretly nourished by the status that confers on me, my attention shifts to hospitals, GP



IS THAT A PSYCHOLOGIST?  
OR A PHILOSOPHER?

surgeries and consulting rooms across the country where support for distress is in high demand with little money. These services are the backstop for clients that I can deem not a match, or more often dismiss themselves. They operate at scale under immense scrutiny. I cannot imagine what an existential attempt to do that would be. I wonder.

The temptation is to treat what goes on in Clinical Psychology as their business and perhaps consider that they have such a different starting point and purpose that it is unhelpful to comment. On the contrary, I see in this launch a clear move to some distinctly existential philosophy and therefore an opportunity for us to meet.

Existentialism feels like a natural home for outsiders, the ones that zig when others zag. The sangha, or community, of practitioners around me is hugely important. But every we creates

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a not-we. Existentialism also (perhaps uniquely) encourages us to hold our identities lightly and to maintain a solid commitment to openness to difference and to others.

I can't speak for existential psychotherapy, but I would like to send a message to Dr Johnstone and co: you have our support. Existentialists are well-placed to be an important critical friend to this fledgeling framework.

I encourage you – the reader – to be aware and get involved. We have much to contribute to this epistemic and ontological challenge to the status quo and maybe something to learn.

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