The Philosophical Principles of Transactional Analysis

The philosophical principles are a central and essential part of Transactional Analysis (TA). Without them many of its models and concepts would lose their impact and effectiveness. At the same time though, the philosophical principles of TA reach their impact through the use of these models and concepts. The theories, models and concepts on one hand and the philosophical principles on the other hand mutually determine each other. And this combination of both aspects constitutes a lot of the impact of TA in practice.

Essentially there are three central philosophical principles which, strictly speaking, are basic assumptions. In their combination they form the understanding of what it means to be a human being. Prospective Transactional Analysts are challenged in their own development to form their own opinion on this. In practice this is often a personal development and learning process that takes time. The assumptions may sound simple, yet their impact is of far-reaching significance.

The basic assumptions of TA are:

1. Essentially, people are okay.
2. We have the desire to grow and to develop.
3. We make decisions and are responsible for them throughout our lives.

Ad 1.: Essentially, as human beings we are okay. This simple sentence has many facets. First of all, it grants us the right to exist on this earth. Furthermore, we are important and worthy in this world, it is good that we exist. The world is a better place for our existence. We are lovable, meaning worthy of love, and we can love. We can receive as well as give attention, care and appreciation.

At the same time, the word “essentially” limits the meaning of the expression. This limitation takes into account the individual developments of people throughout their lives. There is our own personal development, then there is also the development we recognize and experience in others. Maybe we don’t see ourselves as being “okay”, not as unconditionally lovable, important and worthy in this world. Maybe we feel smaller and less important than others around us. Deep inside we might not be convinced that the way we express ourselves does not enhance the world. We may ask ourselves, what is so special about our life and our being. We are critically looking at our mistakes and perceived shortcomings, where we hurt people or ourselves.

We may also think that others are not “okay”, not unconditionally lovable, important and worthy in this world. We perceive mistakes in their behaviour, their human failings and defects. Again and again we might come across situations where we do not find our own behaviour or that of others “okay”. Yet TA assumes that we are in the portrayed sense “okay”, even if our behaviour or that of others frequently is not, because we do not treat each other with respect, care and appreciation, we harm each other consciously or unconsciously or even break laws.
To differentiate between our fundamental value as human beings and our judgment of current behaviour is one of the major challenges for the application of TA. With this body of thought it is deeply rooted in humanistic psychology and occidental philosophy. It questions us in our self-acceptance and the acceptance of others and with it our self-respect and respect of others.

Ad 2.: We have the desire to grow and develop. We enter the world learning and keep doing it for the rest of our lives. The first months and years are full of new impressions and impulses. They challenge us in our development and stimulate growth. We develop mental techniques to bring order into these impressions and impulses, to evaluate them and to learn from them.

This shapes us for our entire life. We are forever traveling, on the way to new discoveries. This need for growth and development is a basic engine for our humanity. It is there even when life circumstances taught us to suppress it. And we may know it ourselves or have heard from others that even after what felt like years of stagnation suddenly our development becomes dynamic again. The impulses, which can be either external or internal, can always surprise and challenge us; we can decide to accept them.

Underlying these impulses is our desire to take ownership of our talents and possibilities. Because each of us is different we are in the end searching for our self, a search for our identity and our goal of self-realization. As we know, this is more of a journey than a destination, as we are able to keep learning and developing into old age. But maybe changes in our lives meant limitations. We might have felt overwhelmed and without control. Or our experiences were negative ones. Maybe we have experienced changes in others negatively - as not improving things. Whatever our personal history with change and development may be - we always carry the desire and ability for development within us.

Therefore, in the practical work with TA the focus is on the development and expression of the personality. The starting point for the development is often a hunch, a conviction, or a certainty about our personal capability for development and the necessary resources we carry within us. Or there are already concrete development goals that drive us. At the beginning of a new phase of development we might not be able to see where it leads us. However, it is this deep-seated yearning for it that urges us to change. This is why TA is also understood as development-oriented or goal-oriented. It follows our need and desire for development, growth, and expression.

Ad 3.: We make decisions and are responsible for them throughout our lives. We think, feel and act, always in the role of the decision maker. From a very early age we decide to do one thing and not another, to say one thing and not something else. We choose relationships and are part of shaping them. We decide what to buy, eat, drink, what to wear, how to live. We decide what challenges we want to face and which ones we do not. And along the way we make countless decisions every day when structuring and dealing with our daily life: which toothpaste is it going to be, which direction to take in a traffic jam, to react to
a comment or not, the small or large pizza, to call the girlfriend or not.

And because we make the decisions we live with the consequences of our decisions. We take on the responsibility for our life. Everything we do has consequences, repercussions. Some we can assess, some we can not. It surprises us possibly much later, positively or negatively. And not always do our decisions have good intentions at heart: sometime we harm ourselves or others fully aware of what we are doing, and sometimes not.

Once in a while we feel pressured, not free in our decisions anymore, for example, when we lack money to freely and independently decide what to purchase, or when career prospects are limited because of too many applicants, or there are conditions we have no influence over, as for example our age, gender, talents and aptitudes, our family references, our socialisation and what we have become so far. All this is beyond our control.

Therefore, in practice it is a central concern of TA to support people in their development processes. So we have to bear these unchangeable conditions in mind. It is important to notice and accept them. We each form our own view of reality with its limitations, both our own and those of others. And it takes courage and determination to make decisions on this basis which will advance us and others, in other words, taking responsibility for our lives.

This concept of humanity has concrete implications for the practical work with TA. The transactional analyst is asked to meet his or her client with respect and appreciation. She should observe carefully and refrain from making judgments. He may be an expert in TA, as his client is the expert of the reality of his own life. She may recognize his client's potential for growth and possibilities for development. Only the client however is responsible for his own growth and development. The encounter between the client and the transactional analyst should therefore be based on an equal footing and be marked by a mature and mutual partnership.

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