

# MEDARD BOSS

[ 1903 – 1990 ]

# PERSONALITY THEORIES

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## Introduction

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It is hard to imagine better preparation for a career in psychotherapy. Born in St. Gallen, Switzerland, on October 4, 1903, Medard Boss grew up in Zurich during a time when Zurich was a center for psychological activity. He received his medical degree from the University there in 1928, taking time along the way to study in Paris and Vienna and to be analyzed by Sigmund Freud himself.

After four years at the Burgholzli hospital, as an assistant to Eugen Bleuler, he went on to study in Berlin and London, where his teachers included several people in Freud's inner circle as well as Karen Horney and Kurt Goldstein. Beginning in 1938, he became associated with Carl Jung, who revealed to Boss the possibility of a psychoanalysis not bound up in Freudian interpretations.

Over time, Boss read the works of Ludwig Binswanger and Martin Heidegger. But it was his meeting, in 1946, and eventual friendship with Heidegger that turned him forever to existential psychology. His impact on existential therapy has been so great that he is often mentioned together with Ludwig Binswanger as its cofounder.

## Theory

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While Binswanger and Boss agree on the basics of existential psychology, Boss sticks somewhat closer to Heidegger's original ideas. Boss doesn't like, for example, Binswanger's ideas about "world-design." He feels that the idea of people coming to the world with preformed expectations distracts from the more basic existential point that the world is not something we interpret, but something that reveals itself to the "light" of Dasein.

The analogy of light plays an important part in Boss's theory. The word phenomenon, for example, literally means "to shine forth," "to come out of the darkness." And so Boss views Dasein as a lumination which brings things "to light."

This idea has a profound effect on how Boss understands things like psychopathology, defenses, therapeutic style, and the interpretation of dreams. Defensiveness, for example, is a matter of not illuminating some aspect of life, and psychopathology is analogous to choosing to live in the darkness. Therapy, on the other hand, involves reversing this constriction of our basic openness, and we could call it "enlightenment!"

One of his most important suggestions for the client is to "let things go" (**Gelassenheit**). Most of us try too hard to keep a tight rein on our lives, to keep control. But life is too much for us. We need to trust it a little, trust to "fate" a bit, jump into life instead of forever testing the waters. Instead of keeping the light of Dasein tightly focused, we should let it shine more freely.

## Existentials

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While Binswanger likes to use Heidegger's Umwelt, Mitwelt, and Eigenwelt, Boss prefers Heidegger's **existentials**, the things in life that we all have to deal with. He is interested, for example, in how people see space and time – not the physical space and time of measured distances and clocks and calendars, but human space and time, personal space and time. Someone from long ago, who now lives far away, may be closer to you than the person next to you right now.

He is also interested in how we relate to our bodies. My openness to the world will be expressed by my bodily openness and my extension of my body out into the world, what he calls my "**bodying forth.**"

Our relationship with others is as important to Boss as it is to Binswanger. We are not individuals locked up inside our bodies; We live rather in a shared world, and we illuminate each other. Human existence is shared existence.

A particularly "Bossian" concern is **mood** or **attunement**: Boss suggested that, while we are always illuminating the world, we sometimes illuminate one thing more than another, or illuminate with different hues. It's no different from how we try to set a certain mood by lighting a room one way rather than another.

For example, if you are in an angry mood, you are "attuned" to angry things, angry thoughts, angry actions; you "see red." If you are in a cheerful mood, you are "attuned" to cheerful things, and the world seems "sunny." If you are hungry, all you see is food; if you are anxious, all you see are threats.

## Dreams

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Boss has studied dreams more than any other existentialist, and considers them important in therapy. But instead of interpreting them as Freudians or Jungians do, he allows them to reveal their own meanings. Everything is not hiding behind a symbol, hiding from the always-present censor. Instead, dreams show us how we are illuminating our lives: If we feel trapped, our feet will be bound by cement; if we feel free, we will fly; if we feel guilty, we will dream about sin; if we feel anxious, we will be chased by frightening things.

For example, Boss discusses a man who was having sexual difficulties and feeling quite depressed. During the first months of his therapy, he dreamed only of machinery – not unusual for an engineer, but not terribly exciting, either. As his therapy progressed, his dreams changed. He began to dream of plants. Then he dreamt of insects – dangerous, perhaps, and threatening, but at least alive. Then he dreamt of frogs and snakes, then of mice and rabbits. For some time, pigs were featured.

Two years into therapy, and finally he began to dream of women! This man was sad and lonely because he had retreated to a world made up only of machinery, and it took a long time before he could dream of anything quite so warm-blooded as a woman! The point to notice is that the pigs don't represent anything – not hidden wishes, or archetypes, or inferiorities – in the therapist's pet theory. They belong to the engineer; They are what his evolving illumination brought to light at that time in his life!

## **Readings**

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You can find Boss's theory spelled out in *Existential Foundations of Medicine and Psychology*.

*Psychoanalysis and Daseinsanalysis* contrasts Freudian and existential therapy.

His work on dream analysis can be found in *The Analysis of Dreams* and *I Dreamt Last Night...*