

Existentialism

2 August: Existentialism
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Drawing on Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre and many others, Peter Bowden examines the underpinnings to this philosophy, in asking the question on what is behind our existence. Whether we indeed have a purpose, or whether we are simply evolutionary accidents, leading largely to the "meaninglessness" of life, to adopt a Camus term. Peter explores diverse streams to this philosophy, joined by a common but not universal belief in the non-existence of God, to assess those streams that appear to offer some coherence.

In its essence, existentialism reaches back to the search by the early Greek philosophers for meaning in our existence. Human flourishing is a term most often used to translate a concept first introduced by Aristotle - Eudaimonia. Along with the term "arete", usually translated as "virtue", and "phronesis", - "practical or moral wisdom," they were major concerns.

The meaning behind our existence then, has a long history. But the modern existentialist philosophers have extended this questioning on our purpose, our meaning much more widely. And very negatively. In the process they have tended to use some very derogatory terms to describe their understanding of our existence.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

Søren Kierkegaard (1813 –1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 –1900) are seen as precursors of the modern movement. It is a movement with many strands, often described by phrases such as alienation, anguish, absurd, freedom, nothingness. These are the negative strands that describe the meaning or purpose of our lives.

There can be positive strands, however, as I will endeavour to point out.

If one reads the newspapers and the behaviours of the human race that they depict, the concept that our existence is absurd is all too apparent - the horrors that we inflict on each other, the anguish experienced by many, the suffering imposed on us by a supposedly loving God, make no sense.

Kierkegaard, a Dane, was a Christian. In his book *Fear and Trembling* (1843) Kierkegaard questioned the anxiety Abraham must have felt when God commanded him to kill his son. Kierkegaard reached the conclusion that you must be willing to give up whatever you love, rather than give up God. It is a conclusion that many will question. There are very few Christian and Jewish followers of existentialism. They do not claim belief in God is rational. It is irrational – but that is their belief.

Many believe Kierkegaard reached his conclusions to explain to himself the break up with his fiancé Regine Olsen, with whom he had a very inconclusive romance. Kierkegaard apparently remained a celibate bachelor all his life.

Kierkegaard introduced many of the concepts found in later existentialist writing – the absurd, alienation, anxiety, but he also believed that a full life required one's engagement – the need to transcend ordinary existence.

For Nietzsche, (1844 –1900) the concept is found in the phrase "God is dead," and in the challenge of nihilism. Central to his philosophy is the idea of "life-affirmation," which involves an honest questioning of all doctrines, even the most socially acceptable.

Heidegger

Martin Heidegger (1889 –1976) is also regarded as an existentialist philosopher and perhaps the originator of the

concern with existence. He insisted that we had forgotten the basic question of what it is to exist, of what being itself is. His best-known book, *Being and Time*, is considered an important philosophical work. Written in 1927, it was long considered untranslatable, not being attempted until 1960. I personally believe the original assessment to be correct, and am unwilling to spend the time to try to find what Heidegger might have said. I do know however, that he supported, perhaps even developed, the existentialist's concept of an "authentic" life. An inauthentic life is one lead through others. It is a thought echoed in other existentialist writing. Heidegger remains controversial due to his membership of the Nazi Party and statements in support of Adolf Hitler.

Camus

Albert Camus (1913 -1960) endorsed and even extended the concept of the absurd. "The absurd" refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek value and meaning in life and our inability to find any such meaning.

Camus was awarded the 1957 Nobel Prize for Literature. Four of his works are worth mentioning:

The Myth of Sisyphus (1942) Sisyphus, a figure of Greek mythology who was condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to see it roll down again. In is in this book that he outlines man's futile search for meaning, in the face of an unintelligible world devoid of God and eternal truths or values.

The Stranger or The Outsider ("Étranger, also 1942) deals with Meursault, a French Algerian, told initially from the viewpoint of Meursault arriving at his mother's funeral and his indifference to her death, and then as he awaits execution in prison for killing an Algerian. Many claim that "Étranger is the ultimate existentialist novel. I agree, if you are looking for examples of the negative side of the philosophy.

The Plague (1947), that tells the story of medical workers finding solidarity in their labour as the Algerian city of Oran is swept by a plague. It asks a number of questions relating to the nature of destiny and the human condition. It is *The Plague* that presages the concept that life is absurd.

The essay *The Rebel* (1951) is about rebellion and revolt, Camus examines a number of writers and philosophers from Epicurus and Lucretius, to Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche. It is in the *Rebel* that he most clearly raises the issue of the absurdity of life.

After the war, Camus began frequenting the Café de Flore in Paris with Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others. But they also frequented Les Deux Magots in Place St Germain des Prés. I might add that even today, the Café de Flore at 172 Boulevard Saint-Germain, has a monthly philosophy meeting somewhat similar to Philo Agora. It is in English.

Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre's slogan "existence precedes essence" is the most distinctive description of the philosophy. Sartre is saying that no general account of what it means to be human can be possible, since that meaning is decided through existing itself.

Existentialism is as much a literary phenomenon as a philosophical one. Sartre's own ideas are better known through his fictional works (such as *Nausea* and *No Exit*) than through his more purely philosophical ones (such as *Being and Nothingness* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*). The post war years found a diverse group of writers and artists linked under the term: Dostoevsky, Ibsen, and Kafka among them.

I cannot explain *Being and Nothingness*. It is a huge book. I have tried to read it three times and have been defeated by the absurdly complex and unintelligible writing. I can tell you what I think it is saying, that being is our existence, nothingness is what that existence is. It is this book that contains Sartre's well known statement "We are condemned to be free", a statement that reinforces Sartre's theme that we have to decide our lives for ourselves.

Jean-Paul Sartre's essay *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), is for me, the most powerful explanation of existentialism. And the most positive. He attempts to defend three of the negative descriptions of the philosophy - anguish, abandonment, and despair. His overriding theme that "Man is nothing else but that which he makes himself" is repeatedly restated. Anguish is that process for deciding how we respond to life - and in the choosing we are "thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind". Such a decision causes anguish.

Abandonment is the abandonment by God, with which then, for an atheist comes the loss of certainty in right or wrong action. There are no a priori values. He tells the story of the young man who has to choose between looking after his old and frail mother, or escaping to fight with the Free French forces.

The third is despair. We wish for much for ourselves. We are in despair if we do not realise the potential we believe we have, if the dreams we have for society, for ourselves, are not realised. Sartre responds with a magnificent quote:

"in life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait"

But we should still struggle; we should still try to achieve: "there is no reality except in action"

I also have to define what Sartre meant by Humanism. Again, a magnificent quote:

"this we call humanism.. we remind man that that there is no legislator but himself; ; that he ; thus abandoned, must decide for himself ; that it is not by turning back upon himself but by always seeking, beyond himself ,an aim which is one of liberation ;of some particular realisation, that man can realise himself as truly human.

An evaluation

It is true that we are accidents - we are here on this earth at the whim of a series of randomly occurring mutations. We survived by those that won out in this long struggle. We have no reason for being. And no ordained purpose. We only exist. It is for these reasons that the Christian churches, particularly Catholicism, condemn existentialism. They of course say that our existence is given us by God; our purpose is to honour and obey God. It is also worth noting that there are evolutionary psychologists who say that these beliefs are a product of evolution. The human race needed the cohesive forces that religion brings to a tribe, and its succour, in the struggle for survival.

I accept that life is absurd, but I reject Camus's nihilism. I certainly reject the thinking of Kierkegaard, that we must love God above all else. Sartre has defined for us anguish, abandonment, and despair. He is certainly more positive than Camus. But still wrong. He is still negative. Of course we see anguish in this world. The human race has come a long way since its early years. We have more ordered government, security for those less well off. Or at least security for some. These developments, another philosopher, Richard Rorty, claims are the finest developments of the human race, since the days we lived under the rule of one man. But we still have brutality. Much brutality. But we can also have a purpose, a meaning. As accidental mutations who have evolved into thinking human beings, we have the capability to decide for ourselves - individually and collectively.

We have a moral obligation to build a world that is better than we found it. The human race has already come a long way, but it is a journey that we have barely begun. Sartre did not even begin the journey. And that is why he has failed.

Susan Wolf argued that a meaningful life is one of active engagement in projects of objective worth. I support this argument - support that has the underlying belief that a meaningful life is beyond an ethical life, beyond even happiness. It is a life that contributes.

Of course we are abandoned - if we live an authentic life, an independent life, with others but without reliance on others, or without God giving support, without the crutch of religious belief. The dilemma he poses for the young man – choosing between his mother and fighting for his country, is a human choice. Here it is between two difficult choices. Other choices are between two wrongs. Or two harms. Or two evils. Philosophers have been arguing these choices for 2000 years. The rest of us, as did the young man, make our choices.

Despair? Again yes, for as Sartre again says: ‘We limit ourselves to that which is within our wills”. We cannot rely on others to take up our struggle, our hopes and goals. The infinitely slow pace of the journey of human development is testimony.

We have a purpose: evolved by pure accident; we have evolved with the ability to think. It is the essence of our existence. I think, therefore I am. We know what the world should look like – John Rawls told us – a world designed by us where we do not know where in it we will be. We know how to behave towards others – a behaviour designated by several philosophers - not to harm others, to relieve the harm inflicted on them by the world. My overriding injunction is that of John Stuart Mill:

The moral rules which forbid mankind to hurt one another (…which include wrongful interference with each other’s freedom) are more important to human well being than any maxims“

It is true. Think about it. I include in this obligation that of relieving harm already inflicted – inflicted by the accident of birth or the misfortunes of life. That is our purpose – It has not been given to us, but to be worked out by us.

It is an obligation yet to be accepted by all of us. Some of us will reject this journey. Why should I have a purpose in life? Others will claim that they enjoy life as it is. Why do more? I claim that it is an obligation placed on us by our ability to think, to reason. For our children, for their children, and by extension, the entire world.

I do not know how to relieve the pain inflicted by chance, by God if you wish - – the death of a loved one – the pain of extreme illness – even the loss of a job, of security. .. They are part of life. And of its essence. Perhaps prayer will help here. .. Perhaps deep reflection… meditation. They are also existentialist issues. They give feelings of anguish, of being abandoned, even of despair.

Susan Wolf, Meaning in Life and Why It Matters. Delivered as the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton University in 2007

<http://www.philosophy.northwestern.edu/conferences/moralpolitical/08/papers/Wolf.pdf>