

Humanities

Notes on Existentialism

When the term existentialism became current in Europe after World War II, only the name of Jean-Paul Sartre was associated with it. Since then it has become clear that the body of existential thought constitutes an authentic philosophical movement embracing (despite their diversity) a large group of contemporary Western thinkers: Camus and Marcel, as well as Sartre, in France; Jaspers and Heidegger in Germany; Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset in Spain; Berdyaev and Shestov in Russia, Bultmann and Barth in Switzerland; Buber in Israel; and Tillich in the United States. But existentialism is more than a philosophical movement. It has become the perspective from which the sensitive and concerned modern man looks at his world. Indeed, one can scarcely understand in any deep sense the general direction of literature and theology today, or the form and content of many contemporary works, (poetry, films and certain art forms) without some understanding of the existential attitude.

The roots of existentialism extend deeply into western history even beyond St. Augustine to pre-Socratic philosophers, even to the author of the Book of Job. But at no time in the past did the existential attitude have the kind of relevance it has for modern man. I suggest two reasons for this: 1) based on the writings of Sren Kierkegaard: the existentialist philosopher or artist was an isolated voice asserting the precariousness of human life in the face of a community that largely ignored or refused to listen to him. As long as the community believed, or thought it believed in the existence of a god who offered the reward of eternity as compensation for the suffering and anguish of temporal life, his warning went more or less unheard and the existential attitude thus remained marginal and undefined.

In the middle of the 19th C. the traditional image of God expired and man was left naked to confront the truths of Huxley's biological evolution and Darwinian theories of the creations of man. The proclamation by Nietzsche of the death of God was the annunciation of the age of anxiety.

The second reason must surely be the advent of two world wars within the lifetime of most of the best known existential writers and philosophers. The first world war, a disaster of monolithic proportions, brought to an end the somewhat innocent and optimistic Victorian Age whilst the second world war, an outrage of human conduct, ushered in the age of atomic warfare and fear for the future of mankind. It is now no longer possible for the philosophers to probe the questions of life without confronting the reality of Nothingness and Absurdity; nor can theologians maintain religious systems without confronting the absence of God, nor for that matter can artists project rational microcosms without confronting the irrational macrocosm. Whether atheistic or theistic, the philosophy and art of the twentieth century constitutes largely an encounter with Nothingness and the effort to transcend the threat that it poses to man's existence as man.

What then, we ask, is the existential attitude? Traditional philosophy we may define very loosely as, defining nature particularly human nature, and imposing abstract structures upon it - philosophy of essence - essence of nature and essence of being. Existentialism is not a philosophy of essences, rather it is a philosophy of existence attempting to view man in his relationship to the universe. Therefore, no two existentialists would have the same vision of the human condition. Nevertheless, contemporary philosophical and literary existentialists, both atheistic (or humanistic) and theistic, subject their thinking to two broad alternatives facing man in a world in which God is dead: 1) Institutionalized and collectivized life exemplified by modern man's dependence on the machinery of technology: 2) the agonizingly difficult authentic existence of the individual who insists on maintaining his unique consciousness in the face of overwhelming pressures to conform.

Both humanistic and theistic existentialists recognize the threat of anonymity posed by the development of mass technological society. They see the ultimate source of this threat in man's real, if unconscious, obsession with order, his worship of progress, his materialistic utopianism that provides modern man with comfort and security, but at the price of his freedom - his existential humanity - thus reducing the human community to the level of an ant colony. Man, says current existential philosophy, has been subordinated to the tool, his consciousness subordinated to efficiency, and individual man is subordinated to the social and productive organizations. The individual has become dehumanized, or to use Martin Buber's term, a manipulable It. A concrete example of man as a willing victim of vast efficient collective mass production processes is Nazi Germany, and possibly, China today. Existential anti-utopianism literature which expresses and examples this dehumanization of the individual can be found in the examples of:

Dostoevsky: Notes from the Underground

Dickens: Hard Times

Eugene Zamiatin's We published after World War I (1924) and subsequently such anti-utopian novels as Aldous Huxley's Brave New World; George Orwell's 1984; Virgil Gheorghiu's The Twenty-fifth Hour.

It is primarily in their positive assertions about man and his relationship to the cosmos that humanistic and theistic existentialists differ. The following definitions of differences is an over-simplification, but I feel will aid you in understanding the complex references of both atheistic and theistic existential attitudes. The traditional Christian view is that man lives in a universe composed of matter and spirit. Spirit is God -- it is external and, in the form of the human soul, somehow inhabits matter in which it must undergo a trial of good and evil in order to work out its salvation. The Christian has a choice between spiritual and material values, between eternal life and the brief life of the world.

According to the Orthodox Marxist view man lives in a world composed exclusively of matter some of which happens to be conscious. Material, organic, and social men are all reducible to operations governed by the immutable laws of a system. It is true that physical man, biological man, economic man do evolve; but these evolutions occur in strict accord with a natural process, which began in primitive chaos and will end in the utopian perfection of the socialistic state. Intelligent men, says the Marxists, see the present as a transitory stage in time. In the Christian view, time itself will end when God destroys it. In the Marxist view, the present is a stage in the development of a socialistic paradise. (China appears to be a better example of the total

Marxist view than Russia, - at present.) In either view, the highest good for the poor creature, man, "here and now," is to ally himself with something larger than himself be it God or process. (ie. system)

Like Marxist man, Sartre's individual lives in a world of things. However Sartrean man is not satisfied to define himself as a chunk of matter that happens to be conscious. Instead like the Christians who separate body and soul, he sets part of himself against nature. It is as if he were declaring himself a creature which would like to live for itself divorced from both the natural and historical process into which he was born. Christians, Marxists and Sartrean Existentialists all start with the statement that man is matter plus "something else", and affirm that it is the "something else" which makes the difference.

"I am matter occupied by spirit" says the Christian, who values the external soul.

"I am matter that is conscious", says the Marxist who values the intelligence.

"I am matter that chooses to exist on its own." says Sartre, whose value is existence.

For the humanistic (ie. atheistic) existentialist the mythic symbol of existential man, according to Albert Camus, is Sisyphus, who, despite his being condemned to ceaselessly roll a rock to the top of the mountain only to have it fall back on its own weight, nevertheless not only endures but also finds joy in his task. For the theistic existentialist the mythic symbol of the absurd man, according to Kierkegaard, is the biblical character, Abraham, who, although he cannot perceive God rationally, nevertheless obeys "by virtue of the absurd" - His terrible command to kill his beloved son Isaac, and discovers joy in the very agony of not knowing he has decided rightly. (Review our discussion on Dostoevsky's theory of suffering and salvation.)

The atheistic existentialist takes the death of God literally. Thus he is absolutely free to create his own essence. He becomes something like his own deity, and, along with the burden of responsibilities and risks, he also assumes the awesome creative potentialities generated by this situation. For the Christian, God is not dead; He is rationally incomprehensible--that is, He is absent or unseeable. Man's freedom, then, is the dreadful awareness of the necessity to choose between a life of despair in the realm of Nothingness (Sisyphus) or Abraham's leap of faith toward divine essence, an I-Thou relationship with God.

For both atheistic and theistic existentialists, then, the royal way of "salvation" lies in the heart of darkness which is this world. Camus after taking his readers to the edge of the void, writes, "This hell of the present is (man's) kingdom at last." And echoing him, the Christian poet W.H. Auden concludes his Christmas oratorio For The Time Being:

He is the Truth Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that
has expected your return for years.

He is the Life
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its
occasions shall dance for joy.

But there remains the crucial difference. For Camus, as for other humanistic existentialists, salvation is the humanizing awareness of the irreconcilable divorce between man and the world; for Auden, as for other theistic existentialists, it is a marriage of the individual and Christ, and, through this a reconciliation between man and the universe.

Here are philosophical definitions of two words which may cause some bewilderment:

Existence: Proof of existence by matchless awareness, recognition and personal conviction. (concrete)

Essence: Spiritual awareness - concentrated in the area of belief (faith) no physical recognition.

Recommended Existential literature:

The Trial and The Castle: By Franz Kafka, both expressing the theme of isolation and estrangement.

The Sound and the Fury: William Faulkner and The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot: embodying the theme of Nothingness, the disintegration of meaning in the modern world.

Ulysses: by James Joyce, and The Age of Reason by Jean-Paul Sartre both dealing with man's painful journey through the irrational self or world.

The Family Re-union: by T. S. Eliot and The End of the Affair: by Graham Greene, both depicting the theme of reconciliation and salvation.

Other works expressing existential vision of the human predicament:
1) The Underground Man - exemplified by Dostoevsky as the poor suffering and persecuted in society - those for whom injustice is a matter of course - outcasts from society - those whose burden of anguish is so great that their lives become meaningless and absurd. (Katerina Ivanovna, for example) This vision of human predicament is to be found in all the works listed below:

Notes From The Underground

Dostoevsky

The Invisible Man

Ralph Ellison

* Waiting for Godot

Samuel Beckett

Metamorphosis

Frank Kafka

<u>Rhinocerosq</u>	Eugene Ionesco
<u>The Lower Depths</u>	Maxim Gorki
2) The existentialis's expression of the courage <u>to be</u> in the face of despair:	
<u>The Fall and The Stranger</u>	Albert Camus
<u>The Death of Ivan Ilych</u>	Tolstoy
<u>J. B.</u>	Archibald MacLeish
<u>The Room and The Birthday Party</u>	Harold Pinter
<u>Crime and Punishment</u>	Dostoevsky
<u>The Power and The Glory</u>	Graham Greene
<u>The Waste Land</u>	T. S. Eliot
<u>The Elder Statesman</u>	T. S. Eliot
<u>Cranmer of Canterbury</u> and <u>Seed of Adam</u>	both by Charles Williams

3) More than any other aspect of the human condition, the phenomenon of death, as the existentialists observe, has laways been the closest intimate of mankind. No matter how obsessively men have striven to outstrip death, the effort has been futile. Death demands that each individual face and come to terms with his mortality.

This aspect is most ably and powerfully described in the following titles:

<u>The Flies</u>	Jean-Paul Sartre
<u>Saint Emmanuel the Good Martyr</u>	Miguel De Unamuno
<u>The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor</u>	Fyodor Dostoevsky (taken from the brothers Karamazov)
<u>A Country Doctor</u>	Franz Kafka
<u>The Tunnel</u>	Friedrich Durrenmatt
<u>The Visit</u>	Friedrich Durrenmatt
<u>Endgame</u>	Samuel Beckett
<u>The Royal Way</u>	Andre Malraux
<u>La Padrona</u>	Ugo Betti
<u>The Queen and the Rebels</u>	Ugo Betti
<u>The Devil's General</u>	Carl Zuckmeyer

<u>Mother Courage</u>	Bertolt Brecht
<u>The Good Women of Setzuan</u>	Bertolt Brecht
<u>Caligula</u>	Albert Camus
<u>No Exit</u>	Jean-Paul Sartre
<u>Orphee</u>	Jean Cocteau
<u>The Intruder</u>	Maurice Maeterlinck
<u>The Ghost Sonata</u>	August Strindberg
<u>Peer Gynt</u>	Henrik Ibsen

The list could be extended - of course, but these should be amply sufficient to suggest the area of existential imagination and thought.

Philosophy:

Atheistic or humanistic philosophy can be found in the works of

- Jean-Paul Sartre
- Albert Camus
- Martin Heidegger

Theistic philosophy existential in attitude may be found in the works of

- Martin Buber
- Gabriel Marcel
- Karl Jaspers
- and of course,
- Soren Kierkegaard

<u>The Visit</u>	Jean-Paul Sartre
<u>Saint Emmanuel the Good Martyr</u>	Miguel De Unamuno
<u>The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor</u>	Fyodor Dostoevsky (taken from the Professor Karamazov)
<u>A Country Doctor</u>	Frank Kafka
<u>The Tunnel</u>	Friedrich Durrenmat
<u>The Visit</u>	Friedrich Durrenmat
<u>Endgame</u>	Samuel Beckett
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