

Existentialism

I. Introduction

- A. Existentialism as a philosophy, or world and life view, is largely a 20th century phenomenon. It is the very antithesis of Christian belief in that it asserts the total autonomy of man. Hence it is one of the most virulent forms of humanism. It spread rapidly because its adherents often convey its message in more artistic form rather than in dry philosophic tomes. Instead, their medium is often novels, plays, art, or movies. They are often profoundly moving and entertaining because they speak to real human conditions.
- B. One cannot properly understand the current state of western civilization without a minimal understanding of existentialist philosophy. Its influence is all-pervasive. The violence and breakdown of modern society in the 20th century can largely be attributed to this philosophy. R. C. Sproul says: *I doubt if there has been any philosophical system that has had as much influence on American culture in the twentieth century as this school of thought.* **LIFEVIEWS**, p. 28.
- C. Definition: There are of course many variants of existentialism, including various religious forms. This outline is concerned mainly with secular existentialism. A common thread running through all secular forms is contained in the following definition:

On the testimony and evidence of existence, life is patently chaotic, incoherent, meaningless, and hence absurd; consequently, the only responsible and honest intellectual and emotional response is to turn to the imperatives of the human spirit, to assert the freedom and autonomy of the self in order to impose meaningful form on the chaotic flux of existence. Clifford Edwards, **CHRISTIANITY TODAY**, 5/12/67.

Ponder this definition and see if it doesn't reflect much of our prevailing culture.

II. Background and Origin of Existential Thinking. The roots of existentialism.

A. Autonomous thinking (general)

This is as old as the original rebellion in Eden. It is man yielding to the

satanic temptation of desiring to be as God, i.e., rejecting all outside (transcendent) sources of authority. Jean Paul Sartre, one of the leading existentialist thinkers said:

There was nothing left in heaven...nor anyone to give me orders...I am doomed to have no other law but mine...Man is the being whose project is to become God. (Note how this closely parallels what the New Agers are saying)

B. The failure of enlightenment humanism. (specific)

1. Existentialism was a reaction against the naturalism and philosophic materialism of the Enlightenment. This naturalistic humanism resulted in a universe which was impersonal and could ultimately not be known. Sire says: *Naturalism places us as human beings in a box. But for us to have any confidence that our knowing we are in a box is true, we need to stand outside the box or to have some other being outside the box provide us with information (theologians call this "revelation"). But there is nothing or no one outside the box to give us revelation, and we cannot ourselves transcend the box. **THE UNIVERSE NEXT DOOR**, p.96*
2. The idea that a transcendent, creator God does not exist is fairly unique to this century. If there is no infinite, personal, creator-God who transcends His creation then there is no infinite reference point which can give meaning to the particulars of life. Man is alone, there is only the cosmos, and man's consciousness of himself.
3. The two great wars fought in Europe were devastating to the worldviews and culture based on naturalistic humanism. Out of this void existentialism came.

III. The Goal of Existentialism

The goal of existentialism is to escape nihilism (meaninglessness). Nihilism being the denial of all truth and value. Notice the nihilism in the following quote:

There is no system of philosophy to spin out. There are no ethical truths, there are just clarifications of particular ethical problems. Take advantage of these clarifications and work out your own existence. You are mistaken

to think that anyone ever had the answers. There are no answers. Be brave and face up to it. Donald Kalish, *TIME*, p.24. 1/7/66.

Albert Camus, a leading existentialist said: *In the darkest depths of our nihilism I have sought only for the means to transcend nihilism.* Camus believed that the one who lives an authentic existence is the one who rebels against that absurdity and creates meaning.

The existentialist answer, therefore, is that the individual creates his own reality and meaning inside his own head.

IV. Major Themes of Existentialism

A. Existence precedes essence, i.e., *doing* is more important than *being*.

The essence of a man is known only *a posteriori*, that is, after he acts. Sartre, said: *...[A]t first, he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no god to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also what he wills himself to be.* **ESSAYS IN EXISTENCE**, p.36.

A man, therefore, is the sum total of the acts that make up his life, no more, no less. When a man is alive (or conscious), he is a subject. When he is dead, and only then, is he an object.

B. Reason is inadequate

Existentialists oppose reason to arrive at truth because certain universals have to exist which they oppose. Existentialists emphasize passion and will. Their emphasis is not on ideas, but the thinker who has ideas. Notice this mood in the following quotes:

Science as we know it has outlived its usefulness. Everett Mendelsohn, Harvard Biologist

"Reason is a limited skill...there is also spiritual knowledge and power. Theodore Rozak, Historian

Equally important are mystery, ambiguity, illogical contradiction, and transcendent experience. Abraham Maslow, Psychologist

C. Freedom as opposed to determinism

The naturalism of the previous century was reductionist in that it reduced all reality to material. The universe was a closed system governed only by chance and natural law. Man is nothing but a complex electro-chemical machine. How then could man's acts be significant? The old rationalistic humanism tried to elevate man but the result was he merged into the woodwork. Bertrand Russell said *Man is nothing but the phosphorescence of slime*. Existentialism is a reaction against this kind of determinism. The extreme is seen in the behaviorism of B.F. Skinner (see CIM Outline #48).

D. Subjectivity over Objectivity.

Truth is personal, not propositional or objective. There is no universe other than the universe of individual human subjectivity. There are no universals, only particulars.

[W]e remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself thus abandoned, must decide for himself. Sartre (Abandoned by whom or what? We might ask!)

Man does not discover values; he creates them. Sartre

E. Since there is no standard to live well we should live much. (Go for all the gusto!)

For the existentialist it was man's feelings and passion which made him a man. Feelings are the standard for truth. It is true if I feel strongly about it. (*How can it be wrong if it feels so right?*)

VI. Christian Critique

Like all humanist philosophies, existentialism contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction.

A. The number one critique of existentialist philosophy is the inconsistency with which they live their lives. If man is truly free, and values are relative, why should Sartre, for example tell the U.S. to get out of Vietnam? (Which he in fact did.) Current existentialists are likewise advocates of causes. In reality, all non-christian philosophies must at

some point borrow (*smuggle*: might be a better word) ethical values from Christianity in order to live. Sartre himself seemed to admit this near his death. See: *IS MAN THE MEASURE*, p.46.

- B. Existentialism is opposed to rationalism yet they write very rational books using all the laws of logic to convince readers that irrationalism is the way to meaning. If they did not employ the universals of language how would we understand their art?
- C. If values are relative how can any society exist? If every man does what is right in his own eyes what can hold society together? How can they cohere against an enemy? From the OT book of Judges we know the answer.
- D. Existentialists deny any absolutes exist yet they treat human subjectivity and freedom as absolutes.

VII. Conclusion:

To understand existentialist philosophy as a christian is to weep real tears for a lost humanity. The popular movie, *FOREST GUMP*, is billed as a *feel good movie* as opposed, I assume, to those which are so violent they assault the senses. However, this movie should not make Christians feel good! We may appreciate its artistry, but the basic philosophy of this movie is existentialism, and it is this total rebellion against any transcendent values which give us the violence we see today in art and society.

The writer of Ecclesiastes also pondered the questions of meaning and existence, but he came to a different conclusion. His solution was the acknowledgement of the existence of a personal Creator Who revealed Himself. *His essence precedes existence* and gives life meaning. See Chapter 12.

For Further Reading:

Barrett, William. *IRRATIONAL MAN*.

Collins, James. *THE EXISTENTIALISTS*.

Evans, C. Stephen. *EXISTENTIALISM: THE PHILOSOPHY OF DESPAIR & THE QUEST FOR HOPE*.

Geisler, Norman L. *IS MAN THE MEASURE?* See Chapter 3.

Schaeffer, Francis A. *ESCAPE FROM REASON*.

Sire, James W. *THE UNIVERSE NEXT DOOR*. See chapter 6.

Sproul, R.C. *LIFEVIEWS: UNDERSTANDING THE IDEAS THAT SHAPE SOCIETY TODAY*. See Chapter 3.