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Existentialism

Asking Questions for Which There Are No Answers

I am an existentialist. "No you're not!" you might argue with me, suggesting that if I truly *was* an existentialist, I would never allow myself to be defined by any quality or label that comes to me *a posteriori* my existence. And so, I might smugly respond, "*Essentially*, I'm an existentialist," a response to which you might laugh, because you get it, or might bang your head against the wall, because I'm an idiot. Or maybe you'll do something else, I have no idea what. In any event, by these unpredictable responses we will be confronted with our inability to master each other, and find ourselves both in existential crisis. I will point out the profound despair I experience as a result of the alienation we now experience from each other, to which you might conclude that either you or I or both have no idea what I'm talking about. As such, because I have completely confused you, I will have proven myself as possessing that quality inherent to all existentialist philosophers: utter unintelligibility. Therefore, I am an existentialist.

But only essentially.

Its unintelligibility not-with-standing, existentialism is certainly one of the most influential and important philosophical movements of modern times. With the decline of many socio-political and religious structures in the last 150 years, existentialism has found it's birth and asserted its force, working its way from conjecture among the academic elite to European films¹ to the "me" generation of the 1980's to TV advertising. As such, existentialism, which is generally considered more of a philosophical method than philosophy or system, has attempted to deal with what it perceives as the loss of *all form*, to find meaning in the face of meaninglessness, as it addresses the ramifications of Sartre's famous adage, "existence precedes essence."

While existentialists, refusing to be called by any label, would abhor my or any attempt to define them, there are certain characteristics inherent to all those using this method – such as, the refusal to be called by any label. Existentialists tend to deny the value of any system, definition, institution, structure, doctrine or relationship by which one would traditionally define oneself

¹ that I don't understand.

objectively. These qualities, traditionally connected to a person's *essence*, are either uncertain, or subjective, or illusory, or artificial, or even utter nonsense, and should they be considered at all, can only authentically be treated *after*, or perhaps as a product of, one's *existence*. A person *exists*, first and foremost, as a conscious subject,² i.e., as someone who *knows* that she exists, as a thinking, feeling, and active subject, inclusive.³

At this point, one might wish to say that we have arrived at the existentialist definition of the human person: a conscious subject. But this would be incorrect – a *logically consistent* existentialist would never be so arrogant as to assume that their unique experience of existence is universal.⁴ However, many existentialist do so anyway, superimposing their own response to their existential plight onto the rest of humanity. Small wonder that such diversity in thought and opinion prevails among existentialist philosophers.

So, the existentialist will say, the human conscious subject, dealing with her own existence, now faces the world around her, and her own lack of meaning and purpose within that world. She faces the abyss of reality, and the supreme paradox that she is both gifted and cursed with the ability to ask that question to which there is no answer: why? There is no teleology for an existentialist, at least not one that can be held without faith. The human person is thus faced with the *nothingness* and *meaningless* of their existence, the anxiety and despair that result from this realization, and once they accept and embrace this reality, the responsibility of providing an answer to that question by themselves, complete with the freedom to answer it however they choose.

So the conscious subject, faced with this gift/curse, may often be unwilling or unable to cope with it, and may therefore take refuge in the aforementioned structures, doctrines, relationships, *forms*, that *she* has in fact constructed herself, and/or has accepted from a tradition of individuals who have made a similar choice. This would be an inauthentic choice however – so say some existentialists – as a denial of the truth: that one has *total* freedom to define *their own* essence. A person who *freely* accepts any system, defines themselves according to that

² Lavine 329

³ Macquarrie 15; The Existentialist thus distinguishes himself from the rationalist, who takes only thought into consideration, or the empiricist, who only considers the world he can sense and thus effect as a cause.

⁴ and in doing so, trump themselves by suggesting there is a universal definition of the human person in the first place

system, and accepts the consequences of that choice, would be acting authentically. A person who *fails* to recognize their freedom to do so, convincing themselves that the system by which they define themselves is somehow *universal* and is thus imposed upon them, making them a powerless victim, that person would be lying to themselves. Human conscious subjects have the *power* to define themselves. To deny that power, and yield it to a collective, a system, a mob, is to shirk their responsibility⁵, and to dehumanize themselves.⁶

Existentialism clearly focuses primacy on the individual subject. Individual existence is the only certainty; the only real truth. One will thus act authentically when she does so cognizant of her freedom, and particularly when these acts *asserts* that freedom, as in Kierkegaard's concept of the "leap of faith,"⁷ and Nietzsche's concept of the "superman."⁸ However, as one does so, she is also confronted with another truth: she alone is responsible for the consequences of her actions.

Thus the free choice has taken the individual conscious subject and confronted her with the world around her, with whom she must interact. This world acts as an "other," which may include other human beings, societal classes, nature, institutions, traditions, God, etc.; basically, anything and everything else apart from the subject's own consciousness. These are the very realities with which she must work to define her essential character, should she choose to accept their systems. Her problem is that she is estranged from "the other;" alienated from it, as it were. As Macquarrie states, "For the existentialist, man [sic] is never just part of the cosmos but always stands to it in a relationship of tension with possibilities for tragic conflict."⁹

She may attempt to manipulate the "other" so as to define herself in a certain way, but the "other" has a freedom and a will of its own, or so it would seem, that is, at the very least, independent of the subject's will, and is often even resistant to the subject's attempts to control

⁵ responsibility to themselves, and for a few existentialists who move beyond the individual subject, also responsibility to others

⁶ One could argue that to evaluate any such choice as authentic or inauthentic is to again presume a universal definition of the human subject. However, at issue is *truth vs. untruth*: is the subject free or not? The existentialist will say that the answer is yes. Of course, *truth* itself, and logic by which truth is determined, are themselves formal concepts. Thus, I would suggest that these existentialists make the *a priori* assumption that truth and logic themselves are either concurrent with or precede existence (similar to an argument made by Bourgeois 250).

⁷ in which the subject chooses the rationally absurd choice, demonstrating freedom from reason itself

⁸ in which the subject defines their own destiny: via natural selection (which may even be imposed), allows humans to develop to their unrealized potential

⁹ 17

it. It is here that a potentially dangerous¹⁰ existentialist ethic emerges. Given the existentialist emphasis on assertion of their freedom, one could say that the “other” can, and perhaps should, be *used* by the individual so that she can assert that individuality. This use can include rebellion, deception, control, abuse, violence, anarchy, all attempts to usurp the freedom of the “other.” Thus, to an existentialist, any behavior that serves to actualize the subject’s individuality, no matter how destructive, could be regarded as ethical.

Still, the way the “other” chooses to *react* to the subject’s free choices, which are unpredictable, are the very consequences for which she is unavoidably responsible, should she continue to be authentic. Ultimately, short of being destroyed, the “other” could still remain beyond the subject’s control.¹¹

And herein lies the paradox: it is only through interaction with that “other,” presenting itself as either existential communion¹² or crisis¹³, that one really becomes conscious of their existence in the first place. It is the “other’s” “other-ness” that draws the subject towards it, informing the subject that she is alone, by showing her the possibility of *not* being alone through communion with that “other.” So the “other’s” uncontrollability is what fascinates and attracts the subject, while at the same time terrifying her with her lack of *complete* communion, and her *potential* isolation and abandonment. And further to this irony, if the subject could somehow master the “other,” gaining complete understanding and effective *control* over it, then it’s “other-ness” would be gone, along with the subject’s fascination with it. The “other” would no longer present itself to the subject as another free conscious subject, and the *potential* isolation that motivated her to seek to control in the first place would be actualized.

Nietzsche...

¹⁰ in my opinion

¹¹ An interesting reflection on the Christian belief that Jesus’ freedom even survived his being destroyed.

¹² wherein the individual realizes through an ecstatic experience of community that there *is*, perhaps, a meaning beyond the individual, but in doing so asserts the subject’s individuality in distinction to that community. Lavine 332

¹³ wherein the individual is confronted with a crisis, who’s very unpredictability and uncontrollability confront the subject with their powerlessness to effect the world around them, and vulnerability to that world. Lavine 331

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