E-LOGOS/2005
ISSN 1121-0442

Existentialism proves absurdity of life without God…

We'll try in this paper to describe what is exactly existentialism (especially according to one of its most important defender, Jean-Paul Sartre). Moreover and on the contrary of Anita Brookner's assertion "Existentialism is about being a saint without God; being your own hero, without all the sanction and support of religion or society.", we'll strive to show the paradox within the existentialist thinking which lies in assimilating the meaning of our own life and the meaning of life.

1) What is existentialism ?

It is difficult to pigeonhole existentialism as a singular thought because there are a variety of approaches to the issues relating to self-purpose. We could just say that it's a philosophical movement which emphasizes certain themes common to virtually all existentialist writers (despite their division into "christian existentialists", Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Marcel and "atheistic existentialists", Sartre, Heidegger, Nietzsche) namely the stress on concrete individual existence, subjectivity, freedom and choice.

- Moral individualism

On the contrary of the philosophers who promote since Plato the idea of the same supreme ethical good for everyone, the existentialists uphold that the highest good for the individual is to find his or her unique vocation. Kierkegaard, who was the first philosopher to call himself existential, wrote in his journal (1835): "The crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, and to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die." Actually this idea lies on the uselessness of understanding on objective or

universal truth. What use would it be for an individual to understand his social or political environment ? What use would it be for an individual to formulate some definitive meaning of something outer of his inner life ? What use would such understandings be " if it had no deeper meaning for me and for my life?" (Kierkegaard's journal, 1835). The consequences of this approache on moral decisions have to be found in the inversion of values reason-passion. Until existentialism, most of the philosophers had emphazises the need of dispassion, disinterest and objectvity in moral behaviour whereas the existentialists promote "passion" which claims against reason every time. The good or the right does not count any more: "I should like to say that in making a choice it is not so much a question of choosing the right as of the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which one chooses." (Kierkegaard in Either/Or, 1843). Against the traditional view that moral choice involves an objective judgment of right and wrong, existentialists have so argued that no objective, rational basis can be found for moral decisions. For instance, Sartre asserted in The Humanism of Existentialism (1946) that "No general ethics can show you what is to be done; there are no omens in the world."

- **Subjectivity**

Following this assertion that passion prevails in individual action in order to decide what is truth or moral, the existentialists insist also on the personal experiences of a situation. The understanding of a situation is indeed, according for example to Jaspers, superior for someone involved in it than to an objective observer. No sciences or knowledge could give solution for "being" and individuals are the best situated agent for acting: "objective scientific knowledge is not synonymous with existential knowledge" (Jaspers, Die Idee der Universität, 1923). "Subjectivity is truth" (Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript), however this does not imply that an individual has to act arbitrary because of the responsibility entailed by the action itself. The existentialist insight that "every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity" means, according to Sartre, that existentialism conceives subjectivity as being in the world or intersubjectivity. It cannot be equated to "subjectivism".

- **Choice and commitment**

The subjectivity in the existentialist mind is all the more important since it determine also the individual's choices, which are one of the most prominent theme in existentialist writing. Humanity's primary distinction, in the view of most existentialists, is actually the freedom to choose. Even in extrem situations like life in concentration camps, the prisoners "offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (Viktor Frankl, From Death-Camp to Existentialism. A Psychiatrist's Path to a New Therapy). Existentialists have consequently held that human beings do not have a fixed nature, or essence, as other animals and plants do; each human being makes choices that create his or her own nature as the well-known quote from Maslow's book, The Farther Reaches of Human Nature, asserts "we do what we are and we are what we do". In the formulation of the 20th-century French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, "existence precedes essence", meaning that we are always free to reject and deny what would constrain and confine us. Choice is therefore central to human existence, and it is inescapable; even the refusal to choose is a choice. Besides freedom of choice entails commitment and responsibility: because individuals are free to choose their own path, existentialists have argued, they must accept the risk and responsibility of following their commitment wherever it leads.

- **Dread and anxiety**

This obligation to accept the risks entailed by choices leads to what Martin Heidegger called "angst" (in German), that is to say "anxiety". Because we are not able to find an ultimate justification for the choices we make, we are confronted with nothingness and despair. Anxiety is then linked with threat to the basic, fundamental values of an individual (not to be confused with fear which is connected to more peripheral values) and it often involves uncertainty and feeling of insecurity: 'in contrast to fear, which is always fear of something, anxiety is 'essentially' without object and attacks us from the rear, as it were.' (Goldstein, Spiegelberg). Existential anxiety refers to uncertainties relating to the human condition, existence itself. In the philosophy of Sartre, the word nausea is used for the individual's recognition of the pure contingency of the universe, and the word anguish is used for the recognition of the

total freedom of choice that confronts the individual at every moment. One of the most famous moment of the nausea (Jean-Paul Sartre, La Nausée) is so that the main character of the novel was progressively being aware that nothing around him (a square, a tree…) is essentially real except him…And this feeling scared him so violently that he threw up. In fact, becoming self-conscious brings a sense of greater freedom, but also an awareness of the separation between subject and object. This leads to a recognition of uncertainty, and ,consequently, insecurity and anxiety. The first moment of realising that one is separated from the rest of the world must be an extremely anxiety provoking experience.

2) The “absurdity” of existentialist “individual values”

We have surveyed a variety of thinkers and tenets which could describe existentialism but let’s remark that the common area of agreement between these thinkers tends to revolve around satiating the human need for determining their individual status in the world. The normative point of this observation is supposed to be that the values we choose to live under are not given; they must be constructed out our choices as these arise in our encounter with the world. That is the nature of our freedom, which can be subjectively denied, but not objectively avoided. It is only in the pursuit of the individual as an individual or as a member of a class that we can begin inquiry about such a person's sense of worth. In a Hegelian world view one would seek their role in a pre-established world where history unfolds and we eagerly solicit our respective part. By contrast, Sartre would decry any pre-established role imposed on us by an external value system that does not appreciate our true freedom to choose such. Nietzsche would join in Sartre's nihilism exclaiming that traditional values no longer exist today because God and tradition have been executed by Man! Thus we are left with a world devoid of any imposed value system and can begin exploring our Sartrian liberty. Kierkegaard would not see the abolishment of traditional values. Instead, as was often the case, he would try to negotiate the "struggling individual" into accepting Christian theism because only this world view expresses a subjective truth so compelling that any rational or cerebral Christianity would overlook it. From Husserl's standpoint, the issue is not whether the truth exists in external values or in a subjectivist theory of truth. Rather, we must simply appreciate the experience our consciousness receives and forego any

ontological disagreement about the external or internal world. Our existential significance will derive from the nature of our phenomenological experience.

But it seems that each existential perspective begins with the assumption that God does not exist or Christianity is not true. The only exception would be the Kierkegaardian standpoint of subjective truth. But even Kierkegaard disdained the apparent overuse of rational discourse with respect to theological issues. In our present age of analytical philosophy, I think that Sartre's message is precisely the direction we should *not* go. Our sense of humility, sacrifice, compassion, and so forth all require that we become a being-for-*others* and not a being-for-itself. It is not our role to create an existential framework and impose it onto the world in order to create meaning for ourselves. This would be to render others as a means-to-an-end, a view that no self-respecting Kantian would dare entertain. For the nihilist it is practically advantageous if no one else adopts this view. The nihilist would do well to convince others about the Golden Rule or Christian ethics so that their own needs and worth are protected while granting the person the liberty to choose a different course of action. As a matter of the theological significance in Kierkegaard's world view, I think that the revelation of God's existence can and is revealed to the seeker. But we should not be so apt to abandon the role of reason as did Kierkegaard. Only by utilizing reason can the Christian subjectivist convince *others* of her faith. Other people cannot partake of Kierkegaard's experience unless they are convinced that it is the veridical avenue to pursue. Why should the individual make the "leap of faith"? Perhaps the answer is more appropriated as: Is the Christian faith true? If we can satisfy the theoretical then we can subsequently assess the practical. It seems that a world where God does not exist permits one to arbitrarily and subjectively create a framework that one merely chooses for personal complacency. Any value that is without foundation is only as viable as the appetites and desires that people permit them to be. But are values so ephemeral that they are only as meaningful as what we make them? If so then what keeps others from creating a Hitler value system that maximizes the Sartrian concept of being-for-itself? It would seem that without an objective foundation, such as God, any proposed values would simply be futile. Besides, may be it explains the apparent confusion in the “existentialist world” in which we can find communist and fascist thinker. It seems that existentialism cannot give us any worthy way to follow but just a way of thinking the world in which we live. Existentialism is just a mood…

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