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What Ever Happened to Existentialism? Part 1

By Tal Davis

"I took a test in Existentialism. I left all the answers blank and got 100." Woody Allen.

In the early part of the 20th Century, a philosophical movement gained great traction in the western intellectual world. Based in the growth of the naturalistic worldview among the European intelligentsia and academia in the 19th century, the movement spread from Europe in the early 1900s, to Britain, and on to America by the middle of the century. The movement came to be called Existentialism. Like many philosophies, Existentialism was very difficult to define. Various popular exponents labeled as existentialists often had quite different versions of what they believed. Some of the more notable persons associated with this movement included the following: Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855); Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900); Martin Heidegger (1889-1976); Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980); Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986); and Albert Camus (1913-1960).

Many famous authors, play-writes, artists, and movie producers, were powerfully influenced by Existentialism and, thus, were instrumental in spreading its presuppositions throughout culture and society. Those included (their major works are in parentheses): Franz Kafka (1883-1924) (*The Trial*); Sartre (*Nausea*; *No Exit*); Camus (*The Plague*); de Beauvoir (*All Men are Mortal*); Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) (*Waiting for Godot*); Anne Rice (1941-2021) (*Interview with the Vampire*); Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) (many abstract paintings); Ingmar Bergman (1908-2007) (*The Seventh Seal*); Francis Ford Coppola (1939-) (*Apocalypse Now*); Sergio Leone (1929-1989)

(*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*); Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999) (*A Clockwork Orange*); Ridley Scott (1937-) (*Blade Runner*); and Woody Allen (1935-) (*Crimes and Misdemeanors*). These cultural icons' works, intentionally or not, expressed the nihilistic naturalistic worldview and the amoral principles of Existentialism.

By the last decade of the 20th Century Existentialism as a prominently discussed belief system had pretty much faded from the consciousness of the general western culture. Nonetheless, the cultural fallout of the movement still pervades many aspects of society. In this two part article, we will examine some of the basic philosophical principles of Existentialism and analyze how they still impact the world today.

The Primary Presuppositions of Existentialism

To try and understand Existentialism one must first recognize several key presuppositions of that philosophical movement. Below are some of the basic concepts that generally characterize this belief system (if it can be called that).

Naturalistic Worldview

First, we have to realize that Existentialism is, at its most fundamental level, based on a Naturalist worldview. If you have read very much on our website, you know that Naturalism is the worldview that essentially says that the material universe and the laws of physics are all that really exist. There is no God or gods, or any other supernatural entities. There is nothing beyond what is in the physical realm. The laws of nature and physics are just the way they are without an intelligent design or plan. As my colleague Freddy Davis clearly describes it:

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"Naturalism is the belief that there is no such thing as the supernatural. There is no God, no heaven, hell or any form of spiritual reality. Mankind is purely a physical animal. To Naturalists, the only thing that exists is matter which is evolving and eternal. As a result, Naturalism assumes that there is no essential meaning or purpose for anything. Human life and every aspect of material reality are just enormous cosmic accidents. The essence of reality is nothing more than material substances which, over the eons, have evolved into what exists today."

"What is Naturalism?" <http://www.marketfaith.org/what-is-naturalism/>

All that existentialists assert, whether they realize it or not, is founded on this essential principle.

God is Dead (Atheism)

As we indicated, Naturalism is, at its core, atheistic (though some may claim to be agnostics or even religious). This anti-supernatural position gained prominence in western philosophical circles in the 19th century. As science increasingly explained much of the physical phenomena in the world and cosmos, many thinkers took the opinion that belief in a creator and sustainer of the universe was no longer intellectually necessary or tenable. Everything was a result of chance and time. Probably the most important contributor to this conclusion was Charles Darwin, whose theories of biological evolution were thought to explain the origins of complex life (especially humans) by natural selection, not divine creation.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the son of a German Lutheran pastor, took this view to its logical conclusion by declaring that "God is dead." By saying that, Nietzsche

was not implying that God had once existed and was now deceased, but rather that God never really existed at all. So now, mankind's belief in Him is no longer viable. Thus, as far as humanity is concerned, God is dead. That's not to say that Nietzsche was happy about God's demise. It was, in his view, just an undisputable fact that inevitably leads to nihilism. He saw only the "will to power" as giving life any meaning.

This atheistic perspective inevitably leads to other principles of Existentialism.

Life is Ultimately Meaningless (Dread and Angst)

The fact that, according to atheist existentialists, God does not exist can only lead one to the stark realization that life is really meaningless. Without a deity, there can be no real ultimate truth, no moral values, no real human worth, and no hope of life after death. Everything is the result of matter in random motion, and time that allows it to change. The earth and humanity are just the latest results of that mindless evolutionary process. It is not directed nor does it have any purpose or goal. It just is what it is.

In this view then, for the thinking person, the logical conclusion of this fact is that there is no meaning or purpose to human life. It is only utter despair and futility. This earthly life is all there is, and when people die, they, and everything else for that matter, ceases to be. On the other side is total nothingness. This inevitably leads to people experiencing dread and angst in life that has no real remedy. Humans are left to their own devices with no transcendent reality beyond their own consciousness (which itself may be a subjective illusion). To Friedrich Nietzsche's credit, he never allowed himself to compromise his nihilist beliefs. The internal moral conflicts he endured may have contributed to his mental illness late in his life.

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For many people who claim to be Atheist or Agnostic, this is impossible to admit to themselves, so they simply choose to not think about it. They go on living as if God did exist while denying it to themselves. They go to school, get jobs, have families, pay taxes, and enjoy life, never seriously weighing the real logical conclusions of their own beliefs (at least not until near the end of their lives). True and honest existentialists, however, understand and accept the hopelessness of their temporal life condition. So what can they do to escape this

dark nihilism? Do they just give up and die? No, they make, what for them is all important, a personal decision to go on living despite it all.

In the second installment of this two part article we will further our analysis of Existentialism and detail some ways existentialists attempt to find meaning for their lives. We will also explain how this philosophy continues to affect the world today and how Christians should respond. So we will seek to answer the question: "What ever happened to Existentialism?"

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