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The Shaping of the "Second Europe" 1914 - Present

Existentialism and the Revolt Against Europe

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Introduction

Existentialism, a philosophical attitude with several common themes, calls in question every assumption of the Enlightenment and the whole tradition of Europe, with perhaps one exception which I will mention in the last section. It rejects rationalism as a way of discovering and knowing truth. It asserts that the world does not make sense from any perspective except the individual's own solitary existence. It proclaims that God is dead and heaven is empty. It sees no meaning or significance to society: the individual is alienated from everyone else and must find meaning on his own. And as for some purposeful pattern to history which could be taken as evidence for human progress, there

is nothing there. History is absurd. The future is irrelevant to man. Man finds meaning daily, hourly, by living in the here and now. There is nothing to look forward to except more of the same kind of life, ending with death and extinction.

The Existentialist and the Rational Tradition

Existentialism breaks with the whole tradition of rationalism going back to the Greeks. You have not seen that whole tradition this term, so let me sketch it briefly, before showing how existentialists look at things. The rational tradition in the history of Europe goes back even before Plato, but we can start with him. Plato, like his predecessors, looked for the permanent, the absolute, that which is always true for all men, everywhere, for all time. He believed that this Truth (and Beauty, and Goodness, and Justice) could be discovered by at least some men who were properly trained, after a long search. It was comprehended by the intellect in stages of greater and greater understanding leading up to a final stage where it was perceived in a kind of intellectual illumination. This tradition passed into the synthesis of Christian and Greco-Roman cultures during the late Roman Empire. Rationalism was not diminished when Christianity became the central point of view as a basis for Europe. One of the basic principles of Europe, as we saw, was the conviction that man could understand a great deal through reason. He needed faith foremost, but after that reason was the major tool for understanding. In the period of the First Europe (900-1350) confidence in reason as a means of understanding the central mystery of life, the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, was very high. Theologians such as Thomas Aquinas used reason guided by faith to build what I called in a lecture in History 1121 [the cathedral of the intellect](#). Even during the period 1350-1650 when Europe was searching for new ways of stating older beliefs about man, the world, God, society, and the future, the rational tradition was not rejected. Then we saw the confidence in reason expressed by the Enlightenment (1650-1789). The rise of science and the conviction that science and reason could discover all important truths led to a resurgence in rationalism. We saw challenges to this in David Hume, but no repudiation of rationalism itself. Then in the 19th century came Friedrich Nietzsche and others who raised fundamental challenges to reason as a way of knowing. As we saw, Nietzsche rejected logic and reason for the will, what he called the will to power. Truth, he said, is not known intellectually. It is created, lived by those who have the courage to live the convictions growing out of their will. They make truth for themselves and anyone else with the courage to break out of the herd.

The Existentialist and Life's Problems

I said that existentialism was a philosophical attitude. By this I mean that it is not a school of thought with common principles. That requires a commitment to rational, logical thought by means of which firm principles may be established and passed on to others who join the school. Existentialists agree only on the problems man faces. They cannot agree about solutions to those problems because of the individualistic nature of their "thought", if you can use the term in connection with them.

Existentialists, whether theistic or atheistic, generally agree that the individual faces the following set of problems as he lives in the modern scientific world:

- (1) First, the general problem of finding meaning in a world shaped by science and technology, in the face of the Mass State (not just totalitarian but also the consumer-driven, pressure-to-conform type). The existentialist faced with the absurdity of the last hundred years asks "Why?" "What is man?" "His purpose?" The difficulty of answering these questions is compounded by the next problem.
- (2) The problem of trying to understand by thinking, using logic. Instead of building intellectual systems man needs to feel and sense his predicament as a being alone and alienated from all others. This difficulty too is heightened by the next problem.
- (3) The problem of man as a comfort-seeker. Man seeks to deal with the predicament of living by conforming to the authority of the group or organization. He loses his identity by adopting the values and given behavior of the group. Thus to problem 4,
- (4) The problem of man as a thing, a commodity, a gadget. He becomes not a person with a unique, authentic self, but an object, an "it". As one existentialist, Martin Buber, put it, he becomes an "it" not a "thou". This grows out of another problem.
- (5) The problem of man being considered only another animal, perhaps a higher type, but still an animal. The popularization of Darwin by the Social Darwinists has led to man thinking of himself as a biological organism with drives like any other organism. Freud exemplified this kind of thinking when he described man in mechanistic terms as a collection of drives striving for realization. Determinism, if you will: what you become is the result of forces within you clashing with each other and with your childhood environment and experiences to make you, in ways you do not even glimpse, let alone comprehend, the organism you are.

What Does the Existentialist Say About These Problems?

The existentialist says that man can only solve the problems he confronts by first understanding himself as a unique being and then by acting on this understanding. To the existentialist, man is a being without a given nature, an *essence*. Instead, he is a being whose dominant characteristic is his *existence*. The existentialist denies everything the whole tradition of Europe says about man. He denies man's capacity to reason his way to truth. He denies man's givenness as a creature of God, made in his image, and little lower than God himself. The existentialist starts with the theme that "heaven is empty and we are left alone" to work out our own essence (nature) by existing. We make our own essence by living, existing. We have the freedom to do that; indeed our freedom compels us to do that. God is dead and all reality is hostile to us. We have no one but ourselves to make ourselves. The existentialist accordingly responds to the problems cited above by

- (1) Rejecting reason as the means of knowing truth. Reason can discover nothing, except perhaps the predicament of the individual. It cannot offer solutions to man's problems. Thus Existentialism is as anti-rational as Fascism.
- (2) Protesting against the view of man as an animal, a thing, an object, a commodity, an "it". Man is unique because of his freedom. He is a "center of freedom" with responsibility for himself. And he should accept the truth of his freedom and take responsibility for himself.
- (3) Distinguishing between truth as something *thought* by the individual and truth as something which *seizes* the individual. Truth is not rationally grasped. It *seizes and engulfs* the individual. The mind may state the truth which has seized the individual in intellectual terms, but the truth itself is not an intellectual proposition. It is lived, not simply known.
- (4) Life is absurd. It is filled with contradictions and tensions. Man is free and yet caught up in his existence. His environment while surrounding and enfolding him does not negate his freedom. He is not just carried along by determinism. He remains free while also being determined, a situation unique to himself. He can transcend his environment, but never breaks free from it. He is a world within himself, yet he is part of the universe and involved in the existence of others.

Varieties of Existentialism

Existentialists come in at least two varieties: theistic and atheistic. Theistic existentialists agree that life is absurd and without any historical or logical meaning. However, they take the leap of faith that all existentialists take, the leap into the void, and affirm that existence is meaningful because they have been grasped by the truth of God and have validated the meaning of that truth by living. Some of those in this tradition are [Soren Kierkegaard](#) (1813-1855), the Danish theologian and pastor; [Gabriel Marcel](#) (1899-1973), French dramatist and philosopher; and [Martin Buber](#) (1878-1965), Jewish theologian, philosopher, and Bible translator.

Atheist existentialists take the position that the absurdity and meaninglessness of life do not justify thinking that the leap into the void leads to God or any other deity. Preeminent in this group are [Albert Camus](#) (1916-1960) and Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980). I want to talk about Sartre and his work, because Sartre made existentialism popular after World War II in plays, lectures and his philosophical writings.

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

Born in Paris, Sartre taught philosophy until the beginning of the Second World War in 1939. He was called into the French army, captured and held by the Germans until 1940 when he escaped to Paris and joined the French resistance against the Nazis. During the war, in addition to teaching and supporting the Resistance, he produced No Exit (1944) a one act play dealing with the themes of existentialism. He also published Being and Nothingness (1943), perhaps his most influential philosophical treatise. In the years after the war Sartre became more involved with public issues, editing and writing a journal called Les Tempes Modernes. He allied himself during the 1950's with the Communist Party in France, without becoming himself a member. He opposed the U.S. intervention in Vietnam and sided with student protests in 1968 in France. The common theme running through his political writings and activities was the belief that he needed to act rather than just think. Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964, he declined, saying that it would compromise his integrity to accept it. He died in 1980 and shares [a common grave](#) with Simone de Beauvoir, a fellow existentialist and feminist writer. Her comments about his death, and her own six years later, perfectly encapsulate the existentialist stance: "My death will not bring us together again. This is how things are. It is in itself splendid that we were able to live our lives in harmony for so long."

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May one logically ask why Sartre bothered to join the French Resistance against the Nazis and the 1960's protests? Why bother if life is absurd and meaningless?

The Existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre

Sartre's existentialism appeared in formal treatises, plays and novels. Probably his most popular work was [No Exit \(Huis Clos\)](#) a play set in a single room with four characters: a valet who introduces the other three into the room; Garcin; Estelle; and Inez. The room is a Second Empire drawing room. No beds, no windows, no mirrors. The three characters cannot get away from each other. They are in Hell, the atheist version. As Sartre says in perhaps the most famous line, "Hell is other people." Unable to get away from each other the characters still react to each other and are responsible for what they do to each other. Imagine yourself in a room from which there is no exit, with other people you hate, without any break.

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Does it sound like Hell to you?

Sartre in 1946 gave a lecture published as [Existentialism as a Humanism](#), from which the following points come. Think about [No Exit](#) as you look at these.

- (1) **For man, existence precedes essence.** Sartre rejected the theme running through the history of Europe as a culture that man had an essential nature which he was to realize. For Sartre this was impossible because it presupposed a God in whose image man had been made. There is no God in whose image man could have been made. Sartre took the position leading back to Locke and Hume and Kant: man cannot know anything apart from sense experience. The mind of man is limited to its own phenomena. It cannot know God at all. To speak of God, he continued, is to speak of contradictions. A being cannot cause himself without being contingent on himself, a logical contradiction. God does not exist. "Heaven is empty and we are left alone." Thus man defines himself, without a model for becoming human. Again, he *makes* himself (his essence) by living. Or, existence precedes essence.
- (2) **Man is free and responsible for himself.** Each individual creates his own values and becomes what he wills himself to become. He is responsible for what he becomes and what he does to others. The characters in [No Exit](#) are responsible for what they do to each other. Sartre talked about the individual being a law-giver to other people. Each establishes values by which others are influenced and is responsible for the influence.
- (3) **Man suffers anguish.** Because he knows he affects other people, the individual suffers anxiety and anguish.
- (4) **Man suffers from a sense of forlornness or abandonment.** He has no God to cling to if he fails. He is *alone* in his responsibility.
- (5) **Man experiences despair.** Because he does not know the future, does not have the assurance of meaning, man suffers despair. He does not know that his life amounts to anything. He has no absolute values to cling to, no God to fall back on (or blame). He

finds meaning only by living, by willing his own existence. But this is not certain meaning. Hence, despair.

- (6) **Man is estranged from all others.** Estrangement, separation, isolation, these characterize relationships with others. Each person is a "center of freedom" into which no one else can intrude without destroying the person. Thus each person is a threat to everyone else, much as one might like intimacy. Love is the impulse to invade the other person's center of freedom and to engulf the freedom of that person. So love is contradictory: one wants the comfort of closeness with another, yet that means the destruction of the freedom and the essential situation of the loved one.

- (7) **What is to be done?** All one can do is face the situation as it is. One can be like Prometheus who never said die when bound in eternal punishment by the gods for bringing fire to man. One can affirm oneself, knowing that this will not change the essential conditions of life. One can give meaning to life by willing to live by one's own values and thus giving them authenticity. The existentialist lives a life of integrity and authenticity, despite the lack of assurance that this makes any difference in any conceivable scheme of things.

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Does no. 7 above make sense if there is no assurance that it matters?

Existentialism and the Second Europe

Perhaps in insisting on man's freedom and responsibility to make himself there is a residue of the Enlightenment in existentialism. If so, that is all.

Reason is dethroned. The world lacks all objective meaning. God is dead. Society, or any group of people, does not matter in any fundamental way to the existentialist. You cannot know others, or relate to them in any way which makes you a better human being. And the future? You are making the leap into the void. What is at the bottom? God? Nothing? Nothing, after nothing, after nothing?

"Heaven is empty and we are left alone." That says it all. Ironically, this mood came along with the unparalleled progress of the last century through the Technological Revolution. As we see in the next session, technology has created an abundant life for many, but has brought with it a new identity for man--"Mass Man".

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