

An introduction to (my kind of) Existentialism.

Existentialism is, in my view, extremely important. It puts forward a view of the situation in which you find yourself, a view of the nature of your existence, which most people don't realise and which makes an enormous difference to the way you see you think if/when you come to terms with it. It is usually regarded as a disturbing and depressing view, and when people first encounter it that is usually how they react. This is because it demolishes the comforting assumptions about their situation that they have been operating on, and can seem to plunge them into despair about the pointlessness of everything. But that's only the first stage and it is not so difficult to move on to focusing on the benefits of this new way of seeing things. It is a profound liberation, the gaining of a freedom to make your own choices about purpose and meaning, as distinct from unwittingly accepting the definitions and values we all inherit from our society as we grow up. But most importantly, whether you find it depressing or a delight, this is about coming to an accurate, mature understanding of the nature of reality, of your place or significance or role in the universe. You realise that the way you saw things previously was mistaken and now you understand.

So what is this existentialist view of "reality"? I think the best way to explain it is by first outlining the common view it contradicts. Most people take many beliefs/assumptions for granted without ever thinking about them, such as, life has a purpose, a meaning, various things are important whether or not I think so such as being honest and kind and working hard, there are ways I should live and purposes I should pursue although one might not know what these are but it is important to try to work them out. Various things are in fact right or wrong, important or not, even if one can't tell. These are ideas about the nature of one's existence; they define the situation you find yourself in and they provide guidance for how you should live and interpret things that happen in life. Even when one can't figure out

the answer it is assumed there is one; “What am I here for?” “What is the meaning of life?”

These conceptions of the individual’s existential situation vary greatly from one society or religion or clan etc. to another, but we all grow up to unwittingly accept a particular set, to assume that those meanings, purposes, designs, assumptions are built into the nature of “reality”. Sometimes they answer most or all questions and the individual knows what is important, what things mean and what should be done. But sometimes people are not clear about meanings and purposes but believe that there are true and certain answers out there somewhere.

Religions contain many beliefs about the nature of “reality”, beliefs which define our situation, the meaning of things, what’s important and how we should behave. Many are sure you should worship God, that He has a plan for you and the world, and that His expectations rule out some behaviours and thoughts and require others. He has constructed a world in which there is meaning and purpose. It is all according to God’s plan. He cares about me, indeed loves me and has my welfare at stake. When disaster hits it’s God’s will. See, everything makes sense.

These normal or common belief systems are immensely comforting or reassuring. Even when they include ideas about reality and expectations that are unpleasant they provide clarity and remove doubt; you know what’s important, how to behave, what’s right, what the significance of things is. “I should go to church.” “I should do my duty.” “God loves me.” “I should make something of my life.” “Karma will get you for bad deeds.” “Good/normal people don’t do that.” “There is a devil, to be avoided.” “Hard work is admirable.”

Existentialists (of the Sartrean variety) say, **sorry, all that is terribly wrong, a very serious mistake about the nature of your existence, your existential situation. There is out there no meaning and no**

purpose whatsoever. You are in a universe that just is, full of stuff and events that are just there, without being there for any purpose. There is nothing you should be for, believe in, or conform to. There is no meaning to your life; you are just an organism like billions of others which find themselves here without any purpose. There is no guidance out there for how you should interpret your experience or decide what to do with your life or how to behave.

If you insist that there is, that there must be purpose and meaning out there, ... well then prove it. What reason do you have for thinking so? Meaning is stuff that human minds put on things, stuff that they create. A sign you come across in the street has colour and weight and shape and marks on it, but it has no meaning. It is given a meaning in and by a society; show it to a Bantu and it will have no meaning to him.

This is what Nietzsche meant when he said "God is dead". He meant not only that we could no longer believe that God provided meaning, nothing else could either.

Angst.

Merely to be confronted by this view of things, let alone to think that it is actually true, can be extremely disturbing. It casts you into a void of "nothingness", "nihilism". Suddenly nothing matters, nothing has any meaning, there is no significance for anything, no purpose in or for anything, nothing is in fact important, there is nothing I should be for, there is no basis for judging anything right or wrong. What then am I to do?

Existentialists refer to this state as "angst", "dread", "existential anxiety". Sometimes they refer to the occurrence of "nausea." You are alone in the universe with no rules for guidance. All the structures and rules you once could refer to in order to make sense of things and find out what is important and what you should do

have been swept away. Of course there are plenty of rules but they are only the ones your family or society have set up and are not necessary; others could have been set up. “You mean it is no more important that I work hard to become a research scientist than if I choose to become a bum?” “You mean there’s no difference between the person who chooses to be a nurse and one who chooses to become a serial killer?” To run into these possibilities can dump you into a dreadful, anxiety-ridden, sickening state.

It’s not just about rules, it’s about reality; the way things are is not necessary; it is as they say “contingent”. They don’t have to be the way they are; they just are the way they are, for no reason or purpose. What a meaningless, purposeless mess we find ourselves in.

One confusion the existentialists’ language creates unnecessarily comes from their use of the word “absurd.” Existentialists often say reality, existence, the world, and your situation are absurd. They just mean meaningless, without purpose. They don’t mean ridiculous or illogical. Similarly, they talk about the world and existence as being “irrational”, meaning that there is no reason why they are as they are.

It is no wonder that people react by pining for the old comforting doubt-free purposeful and meaningful world view, wishing they could have back all those worry-settling definitions, rules and certainties. This is referred to as “nostalgia.”

But this state of dreadful realisation is only stage 1; it is possible to go on to seeing it as having been the first step to liberation for a meaningful and satisfying life. Sartre says, “Life begins on the other side of despair”. (See further below.)

Existentialists often muddy all this badly with their inexcusably turgid and pretentious language. I strongly recommend keep away from

Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Nietzsche until late in the day, and don't read Sartre until you someone has told you what he is saying. (In my view the extremely important point Sartre makes about morality is not clear until about p. 550 in his obscure Being and Nothingness.) And the above trio are for some things I find abominably silly and/or wrong. (See further below.) Never mind, they get the core theme right.

Authenticity.

Existentialists say people who face up to their existential situation are being "authentic". This does not mean genuine or unpretentious or frank/honest or avoiding being artificial. It just means they proceed in life and deal with its puzzles and difficulties clearly aware that there are no answers "out there" to be found, and clearly aware that they are on their own in deciding what's important or what they are going to be for or do. It's not just that they have to decide and can't refer to the concrete rules set by head office, it's that there are no criteria for finding the right, or any, rules. Yer on yer own mate, in a swamp of nothingness. Sartre describes your condition as "forlorn". He says that to accept this is essential if you are to be "authentic" and to fail or refuse to face up to it is to exhibit "bad faith".

The centrality of freedom.

All this is a realisation of your limitless freedom. Existentialists stress this. You are not constrained by any given, pre-existing purposes and meanings, so you are totally free to interpret, value, choose or do anything. You can if you wish choose to work hard, lie, kill someone, look after your kids, neglect your kids, or be prime minister someday. You don't have to choose any of these or anything else. And if you choose not to choose, that's a choice! So it all gets worse; you can't escape your freedom. As Sartre says, you are condemned to be free. Now that looks dreadful, a constant and inescapable source of

“angst”. How nice it would be to believe some things are not matters of choice but are given, non-negotiable must-follow rules and purposes and values and choices. That’s nostalgia, pining for the old lost situation.

Non-existentialist people often say things like, “I had no choice, I had to do it because it was my duty.” The judge might say, “I didn’t like passing that death sentence, but I had no choice ...it was the law, and it’s my job to implement the law, and so I am not responsible and need not feel any guilt over his death.” And the bomb aimer might say, “I had to press the button, it was my duty.” Obviously, he didn’t have to... he could have chosen not to. He could have chosen to desert or to be a conscientious objector. He was perfectly free to choose not to. Of course, the consequences for him would have been grim, but that’s irrelevant; he was free to choose not to. (Kant put duty at the top of the moral heap; just one more serious mistake he made. What if I told him, “I didn’t like doing it but I killed my sister, because she had dishonoured the family and it was my duty to kill her.”?)

Responsibility.

With this freedom comes (dreadful) responsibility. You are responsible for the consequences of your choices. The bomb aimer’s action resulted in certain consequences. His choice brought them about and he was free to choose options that would have avoided them. We do this every moment of our lives, in big and little ways. I am totally free to take all my money out of the bank and give it to an agency that will save the lives of many African children. I choose not to do this. This is where conventional morality comes in very handy. It is black and white and has cut-off points and thresholds. If you don’t lie, or steal or harm others you are on morally safe ground and have avoided moral worries. If you cheat you have crossed the line and have sinned. Moral codes and social expectation allow people to dodge the problems the existentialists see. I might say my main

responsibility is to look after my family, or I have no obligation to give to that agency, or that I must do my duty and press that button... and then have peace of mind; I have done the right thing and need not feel angst.

These clear conventional black and white, on/off distinctions are a blessing. It is morally terribly wrong to kill a human, but there is nothing at all morally wrong about killing a weed or a mosquito. Try justifying this assumption, proving that it's true. Weeds and mosquitos are incredibly complex, inexplicable organisms produced by billions of years of evolution, with as I see it have as much right to be here and enjoy life as I have. I don't think there are any moral rules built into the nature of the universe which justify murdering them but prohibiting the murder of humans. The belief that there are such rules is very comforting to the conventional mind is the that there are such rules, enabling you to and decide emphatically without any doubt that two of the above killings infringe no moral rule and one does. Peace of mind is at hand if you just refer to the rule book as you go.

So, freedom is inescapable and brings with it responsibility for the consequences of your choices and determines that you must live with the fact that you brought those consequences about and need not have. Not a nice situation to be in. But much of reality is not nice when you understand it. I find the Big Bang theory in Astronomy to be disturbing but I see it as something a mature person faces up to and accepts as the way reality seems to be. It's the same with the existentialist perspective; it is something you just have to be grown up enough to accept as describing the way things are, describing your existential situation, and you have to come to terms with it. You have to work out a modus vivendi, a way of living that takes it on board somehow. That is not necessarily easy or problem free. But like death and taxes a mature person grapples with it and arrives at some kind of accommodation, as distinct from denying it and going

back to the old perspective assuming given certainties. That's exercising what Sartre calls "bad faith".

Unfortunately, I think all of the famous existentialists make the mistake of going on from these basic themes to put forward claims that are sometimes illogical in view of those themes, that is, claims that contradict their own basic beginning point. For instance my hero Sartre, insists that when you face the void of nothingness, no criteria, values, meaning, purpose out there to settle questions, you must choose...and when you do you must "...choose for all men". This is a howler, an appalling mistake. It contradicts his fundamental position, which is that there are no criteria out there to which you must subscribe. You no more have to choose for all men than you have to choose for Santa Clause. This within over 600 hundred pages of Being and Nothingness driving home your absolute and dreadful freedom from any constraints! (It is most evident in his Existentialism is Humanism.)

And they often go on to advocate particular options which are nothing more than their preferences or prejudices, and by no means "necessary". This is evident in their advocacy of living an authentic life. But you are free not to opt for that. Most notable is Nietzsche's eulogy for the Ubermensch, the "noble" superman, and his scathing rejection of the "slave" mentality characteristic of the weak, especially evident in Christianity. That's just an expression of his preferences, choices

Individualism, identity, the self.

Existentialists make quite a fuss about the idea that you create yourself, by the choices you make, and the authentic person works hard on this. Sartre's famously puts it (confusingly) as, "existence precedes essence". That is, you come into existence and then form your nature. There is no pre-existing human nature and no identity you have or should have. Your identity or self-concept should not be

due to the definitions or judgments of others or your society, but is up to you to choose and form, and you create your self by your choices. Sartre stresses the responsibility involved here; you are responsible for what you become.

This aligns with their rejection of any inevitability/necessity in social definitions. The authentic life involves working on this task. Being “an individual” does not necessarily mean being a non-conformist; one might go along with social conventions but only if one has chosen to do so clearly aware of their non-necessity and one’s freedom to choose or reject them. Nietzsche praises the superman for heroically having the will, strength, power, to assert and carve out and pursue his own way and identity despite what others think. (Most of us would probably think his superman is too ready to be self-centred and ruthless in this quest ... and super woman doesn’t get a mention.)

Does it lead to nihilism?

This is another misleading term. It can refer to two things. The first is a world view in which one sees no purpose or point or meaning out there. In this sense existentialism = nihilism. In the second sense assumes that existentialism leads to terminal depression; the universe and my existence has no meaning, there’s no point, so I might as well just sit around and make no effort to do anything. I was set to become prime minister, but not now. Again something like that is often the first reaction on encountering existentialism, but would be to fail to see the positive implications, to see that you have been liberated to opt for nice, meaningful, fulfilling things, that you can now make your own meaning, define your own purposes and self, and choose the goals and ways that will make your life enjoyable and contribute to the achievement of a good world (... if that’s what you’d like... your choice.)

It is very unfortunate that most accounts of existentialism do not stress this. Most leave people with the common but badly mistaken view that it plunges you into unescapable despairing nihilism and leaves you with no hope and no chance of being happy or achieving a satisfying life. This outlook can easily be avoided if the issue is introduced properly, but it probably never is. I think Sartre especially has helped me to understand something very important about the nature of reality, about the nature of my existence, my existential situation, and that in coming to that understanding I have grown, become a somewhat more mature, knowledgeable and wise person. I am not depressed about this or lacking meaning and purpose, because I have found lots of sources of meaning and delight and things to be for. Possibilities are all around you, you are free to choose. There are none you have to choose.

The connection between existentialism and the subjectivist view of morality.

Hopefully this will be obvious by now. Moral Subjectivism is an implication of existentialism; if you accept existentialism then you have adopted the view that there are no moral values out there. Nothing is Objectively right or wrong. Physical things have observable/verifiable qualities such as hardness or temperature, but actions do not have any moral quality. We humans value actions, that is, define some as good and some as bad. The moral objectivist thinks cruelty is in fact, by nature wrong. They think wrongness is an objective quality it has whether you think so or not. But the Subjectivist says all we have here is a human evaluation, a preference; most of us don't like cruelty and we condemn it and make rules against it. That's all you can say about it. You can show that steel has a quality of hardness but you can't show that cruelty has a quality of wrongness. Similarly, it is a mistake to claim that humans have rights. You can show they have legs, but you can't show, prove, that they have rights. Rights are only things human societies assign or give. To claim humans have a right to freedom of

speech is only to say something like we opt to make sure people are free to speak.

And the connections with responsibility and on/off Objective morality are evident. If morality can only be about rules which humans set up according to their preferences, then there is no safe ground from which to say, "It was in fact the right thing to do so I need not feel guilty about the consequences."

At first sight this Subjectivist view of morality strikes most people as totally wrong and disturbing, indeed repulsive. Understandably they are comfortable with a world in which you can take it for granted that some actions are wrong in fact and to be avoided. But that's what Sartre would call "bad faith".

Subjectivist morality does not mean we can't design and run a good society. We are free to set up rules and incentives that ensure that (enough) people behave in civilised ways. (For the detailed explanation of Subjectivism see. <https://thesimplerway.info/Morality.htm>.)

Disenchantment.

Some people criticise existentialism for "disenchanted the world", that is stripping it of the meaning and purpose humans need to live enthusiastic, purposeful satisfying lives and that societies need in order to thrive. If people come to believe nothing really, Objectively matters will they make any effort to improve themselves or their society, or even turn up to work today. Won't they just be permanently depressed and bored seeing nothing to believe in or strive for or be inspired by?

My kind of existentialist strongly disagrees, again seeing this perspective as freeing us from mistaken assumptions about reality, which are often very damaging, and freeing us to find or create our

own meanings and purposes. Again, Sartre says you can go on from the initial state of despair to have a nice, meaning-full life.

I do not want a situation in which contented lives and stable robust societies are driven by false beliefs, myths and superstition. I can see the possibility that things might work more satisfactorily if they are and no one is an existentialist. I would much prefer that we scrap all that old rubbish and work out how to have nice happy people and good societies based on an acceptance of the existentialist view of things. After all Galileo et al. managed to get us off the myths about the nature of the solar system that previously comforted people, without ruining our mental health. And many of those myths and superstitions were terribly damaging, not only constantly tormenting people with fear of witches and hell for instance, but ensuring that the rich dominated, kings had a divine right to rule, and deviants were butchered.

But as I see it there is a much more important issue than social stability; again existentialism opens the way to a joyful, reverential, meaningful and purposeful life because you are no longer constrained by religion or social conventions defining meaning and purpose you can go find your own. You are dumped into the world for a tiny few years and someday the adventure will end and soon no one will remember you, so you might as well set yourself to explore and enjoy and find interesting things to do and be for. Just delight in the gift. There are actually an infinite number of fascinating things to explore and enjoy and learn about and marvel at. There is a lot of growing and becoming wiser and more in tune with your existential situation that you can engage in.

As I see it, a satisfying life is about interests and purposes. So go find some. A lady on the radio the other day was obsessed with slime moulds; lucky soul. One of my interests is making ship models. They, and I, will all be gone and nobody will remember them or me in a thousand years time. No problem. That does not concern me in the

least. Meanwhile I will enjoy starting to make a jib for Acamas tomorrow morning.

And I think that once people have found their way out of Plato's cave they are likely to treat each other better. Firstly, they will have seen through the mythical convictions that so often generate conflict and harm, such as the taken for granted beliefs and commitments associated with racial purity, patriotism, infidels and heresy, and justifications for domination. To see these as mere and unnecessary conventions is to see that they can and should be changed if they are not satisfactory.

Secondly, the recognition of responsibility orients one to improving things. If you see that you are responsible for the things you don't do, the things you could make a difference to, then you are more likely to try to fix things. You realise you have a burden ... (but only if the welfare of others and seeing things improve are values you hold.) When you have scrapped the on/off conception of morality you realise there is no safe and comfortable ground where you can relax free of moral worries. OK you have paid your taxes, been kind to the cat and not broken any laws today, but that does not deal with those starving Africans you could make a difference to. You cannot escape being nagged by the fact that you could make a difference to the world and there's no reason why you should or need not do so. Most of us feel some desire if not obligation to improve things and assist our fellow humans. Transcending conventional on/off morality and recognising our freedom and responsibility makes it more likely that we would make some effort to do such things.

The insoluble dilemma.

Sartre is right to stress that meaning and satisfaction and enjoyment of life are possible for an existentialist but as I see it there is no escaping some degree of angst at least to do with responsibility. I could become obsessed with those starving children and the serious

consequence of the fact that I could do something or do more to help them, to the point where that could ruin my life. The way to avoid this dilemma is simply to (choose to) ignore the situation, or keep it on the back burner and not let it worry you too much. This is what most of us do all the time. The problem for anyone concerned about the state of the world is that this action is precisely what keeps the world in a mess! It could all be fixed up very quickly if people cared about the problems, but the depressing fact is that they don't care much. That is infuriating and detestable...but I have to do the same to some extent if I am to have a tolerable life! I have to choose where to draw the line, to choose the extent to which I worry about and do something about the Africans and the extent to which I choose to prioritise my welfare. It's a dilemma with no satisfactory solution. You are stuck with some degree of angst. That's part of your existential situation.

The sociological conundrum.

I think the most difficult area for we theoreticians is the question, why don't I cheat, steal and lie whenever I can get away with it? If I believe I am free to do so, that is, I could choose to do so and not be doing anything that is in fact Objectively wrong. So how come I don't? And if everyone was an existentialist wouldn't social order collapse?

The short answer is, I don't do those things because I don't want to. But that just sets up the question, why not? The answer is because I want to behave in ways that would enable the kind of society I would like. Again, why is this what I want, and what happens if others don't? Other existentialists don't have to choose what I want.

The solution here is not a matter of reasons or logic; it is a matter of intrinsic built-into-your-bones values, feelings and dispositions. It can't be argued that we ought to be for a nice stable society. We just have to take steps to ensure that people in general will want to

enable such a society and would therefore refrain from doing anything that would undermine it, even when they could get away with it. This seems to mean that the basic prerequisite for a good existentialist society is some kind of indoctrination. That's what happened to me between the ages of 0 and 25 and why the existentialist convictions I have now pose no threat to good order; I am now not disposed to cheat and lie and steal. Those dispositions can't be got into souls by reasoning. No good telling Johnny that if he takes Mary's toy she will be sad ... unless he already values avoiding sadness in others.

The extent to which a society will be a good society depends on the extent to which its citizens have built into their bones some fundamental pro-social values, feelings and dispositions. That's easily done, by manipulating kids, maybe raising them as convinced conventional Objectivists, and then putting them through existentialist boot camp when they can handle it. But I don't think that we could get those crucial non-cognitive factors installed without some form of deliberate mass lying or brain washing of the innocent. (Kant and hoards of similarly mistaken philosophers believed that reason is capable of revealing what we ought to value and what is morally right. It can reveal what we ought to do ... but only if we want to achieve a "good" society, but reason can't prove that you should want that.)

So maybe we would be wise not to tell people about existentialism. Maybe they would be happier with their myths and superstitions despite the damage these cause. But who says happiness trumps wisdom? You choose ... no one else can settle it for you.