



## Existentialism

### **Me, here, now**

It has been said that the characteristic philosophy of the present time is existentialism, but defining it with precision is about as easy as nailing jelly to a wall because it is a position held by philosophers ranging from the strongly theistic to the stridently atheistic and there are profound differences between individual points of view.

The word is based on the German *existentialismus*, meaning 'to stand forth' or 'to stand out', and The Chambers Dictionary provides as good a one-sentence explanation as I have been able to find: 'A term covering a number of related philosophical doctrines denying objective universal values and holding that people, as moral free agents, must create values for themselves through actions and must accept the ultimate responsibility for those actions in the seemingly meaningless universe.' Rather than dealing with the nature of the universe and objective philosophical problems, existentialism is concerned with an individual's attitude to life.

Some scholars trace the roots of existentialism as far back as the 'Golden Age' of Greek philosophy, but it will be sufficient for our purposes to pick them up in the nineteenth century. By far the best-known theistic existentialist during this period was the somewhat quirky Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), who adopted a cynical approach, not only to Hegel's idealism, but to rationalism, romanticism and to organized religion and human behaviour in particular. As this note from his Journal makes clear, truth for Kierkegaard was not abstract and objective but something intensely personal: 'The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die.' As he put it elsewhere, 'Truth is subjectivity.'

Although he believed that God was the ultimate source of reality in the universe, Kierkegaard was so opposed to rationalism that he could write, 'God does not exist; he is eternal.' This one statement shows that it is almost impossible to pin him down as to the nature of God. There are times when he appears fairly orthodox and others when 'his view of God seems to have a great deal in common with the Wizard of Oz'. Kierkegaard sees men

as thrashing about in a dangerous sea, finding meaning and security only when they take a risky and irrational 'leap of faith' across the chasm separating them from God.

Because he worked out his model (though he would have denied that it was anything so formal) within a theistic framework, we can leave Kierkegaard there, but his importance lies in the fact that current existentialist emphases on individual existence, subjectivity and inwardness, and commitment to existential involvement spring largely from this man, whose lugubrious approach to things has led to his becoming known as 'the melancholy Dane'.

### **Anxious and alone**

The two key players in the history of modern atheistic existentialism were born within a few years of each other, one as the nineteenth century drew to a close and the other as the twentieth began. The first was the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) who once studied for the Roman Catholic priesthood, but then turned to philosophy and was strongly influenced by the works of Plato, Kant and Nietzsche. For part of the 1930s he supported the National Socialists (Nazis), though he later turned his back on them.

His major work, *Being and Time*, was first published in 1927, and discussed the pressures and problems facing men living in a post-Enlightenment secular society, a world without God. Heidegger called this situation 'the dark night of the world', a world from which the light of God had been eclipsed and in which men were left to grope around as best they could, searching in the darkness for any scraps of meaning that might be found.

To emphasize man's dilemma and trauma, Heidegger invented the word *Geworfenheit*, which means 'having been thrown-ness'. It is a graphic description of the disorientation felt when finding oneself in bewildering circumstances. I vividly remember that a few years ago, on the first full day of a round-the-world speaking tour, I woke up with the feeling that I was completely out of touch with my surroundings. The whole atmosphere seemed strange to me. I felt as if I had been thrown into an unfamiliar setting with which I had no connecting link, but as my senses slipped into gear my bewilderment quickly dissolved. Bangkok, Thailand, was certainly a city I had never before visited, and the sights, sounds and smells were all new to me — but I no longer had any sense of *Geworfenheit*. I knew how I had got there, when I was due to leave and where I was going. What is more, I knew why I was there. My being there was something I had chosen, and the timing of my visit was something over which I had at least some measure of control.

In Heidegger's view of things, the sense of having been hurled into an alien, impersonal universe in which we can never feel at home produces *Angst*, a gnawing anxiety as to our existence and identity and a deep-rooted fear of meaninglessness in the face of what he called our 'propulsion towards death', the fact that in a few years at most death will reduce us to non-being. *Angst* is what grips the existentialist when he reflects on his belief that he came out of nothingness and is moving inexorably towards nothingness.

Existentialism rarely uses the word 'man' in its common, generic sense. Instead, we find expressions like 'thereness' (one of Heidegger's favourites), 'existence', 'ego', 'being there' and 'being for oneself'. For the existentialist, there is no such thing as collective man, only individual men and women. This intensely personal focus is in part a reaction against the dehumanizing factors in modern society — not only dictators who deny human rights and philosophical systems that reject individual freedom, but urbanization, industrialization, bureaucracy and technology, all of which tend to see people as anonymous units in the

context of planning, consumption or production. Existentialism has been called '... basically a reaction against the extremes of scientific rationalism which, many feel, tend to dehumanize man to the level of a biochemical machine... The great emphasis on experience, irrationality and absurdity among avant-garde elements in the art world in the West is further evidence of this reaction against reason.'

Existentialism's anxious self-concern is said to be what distinguishes men from the natural world and from brute animals, in that horses, trees, rocks and plants are not concerned with how they came into existence or how they arrived at where they are. For existentialists, this means that only human beings, aware of their existence, are said to exist (or, in one of their favourite phrases, to have 'authentic existence'). In Heidegger's own words, 'Rocks are, but they do not exist. Trees are, but they do not exist. Horses are, but they do not exist. God is, but he does not exist.' As to what 'exist' means when used in this way, Heidegger says, 'The proposition "man exists" means: man is that being whose Being is distinguished by the open-standing standing — in the unconcealedness of Being, from Being, in Being.' Clarity was not his strong point!

Heidegger is concerned that men should not settle down in 'inauthentic existence' as one of the crowd (what he calls 'irresoluteness'), seeing themselves as nothing more than skin-covered objects and treating death as something that happens to others. Instead, he calls on men to exercise their freedom (in modern jargon, to 'do their own thing') and bring their potential nature into being. There is therefore a sense in which, for the existentialist, selfhood is not something anyone has, but something which is being developed in the course of a person's life. As one writer puts it, 'Man is possibility because he stands before a future. He is always on his way and incomplete in his being; he has always to make himself and is not provided with a ready-made nature like a stone or an iceberg.'

Along with 'Being' and Angst, another of Heidegger's major concerns is death, and it is important to see where this fits into the picture he creates. As there is no creator or judge, it is pointless for a person to think of any kind of reality before birth, or to be concerned about what might happen after death. B. A. G. Fuller explains how Heidegger relates this to the individual: 'Life is cast up between nothing and nothing. Death is its boundary and its supreme possibility. To freely accept death, to live in its presence, and to acknowledge that for it there is no substitute and into it one must go alone, is to escape from all illusions and to achieve genuine dignity and authentic existence.'

Heidegger leaves us with the picture of a human being as someone who finds himself anxious and alone in an unfriendly world. To become 'authentic' he must create his own existence and essence and can do so freely and without any fear of future judgement. As Robert Brow explains, 'Existentialism... denies that there is any ultimate purpose or end and ethics becomes an exhortation "to do something boldly anyway".'

## **The media man**

The second key player in the history of modern atheistic existentialism was Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) the French philosopher, dramatist, essayist and novelist. The last three descriptions are particularly important, because Sartre's brilliant ability to use the popular media in getting his message across is one of the most significant reasons why huge swathes of human culture are drenched in existentialism today. Born in Paris, Sartre was the leading student in his philosophy year at the renowned Sorbonne. He worked for a time as a

teacher but, after the Second World War, part of which he spent in a Nazi prison camp, he committed himself to writing and to supporting left-wing political causes. In looking for a way out of the upheaval caused by the war, he became increasingly involved with Marxism, and gradually established an international reputation as one of the most powerful and influential European thinkers and writers of modern times. He refused the 1964 Nobel prize for literature 'for personal reasons'. Here, we can touch on just three of the major issues with which he concerned himself — God, man and values.

As to the *existence of God*, Sartre called himself 'an atheistic existentialist', and said that the idea of God was 'contradictory'. He made the claim that his atheism was based in part on an experience he once had of sitting in a cafe and feeling that he was being stared at by another customer. Sartre felt that this dehumanized him by reducing him to an object and that, if God were omniscient, his all-seeing stare ('gaze' is Sartre's big word here) would do the same. This produced an intolerable conflict with Sartre's conviction that human beings were subjects, not objects; the only way to defuse the conflict was to deny the existence of God.

Along similar lines, the existence of God clashed with Sartre's fundamental assertion that human beings are totally free to define their own existence and essence by the way they choose to live. If God existed, men would not be free to choose their own values, ends, means and existence, because these would have been chosen by a transcendent Being who stood over them and, as Sartre saw it, reduced them to the level of objects. A God who laid down a moral code, and to whom men were answerable, would rob them of their moral autonomy, so God must go. Of course Sartre gives the game away here, and shows that his atheism is assumed, not proved.

On the question of *human identity*, Sartre's major idea was that existence precedes essence and that it is pointless to think of 'human nature' because there is no God to conceive of such a thing. Put very simply, traditional theism taught that essence precedes existence and that God had humanness in mind before he created man (a modern analogy might be a car designer having the finished product in mind before the car is built), while in Sartre's existentialism a person begins with an awareness of his existence and then needs to determine his own personal identity or essence. Some of the most radical existentialists go even further and say that there is no such thing as essence and that only existence has reality. As Sartre saw it, human beings exist, not as part of an a priori essence of humanness, but as unique individuals who do not know what they are like or what meaning they have. Yet whereas everything else in the universe is a thing 'in itself', a fixed object, with no self-consciousness and no relationship to anything else, each individual person is a being 'for itself', a fluid entity with immense possibilities which can be developed by choice, commitment and action. People are free to become whatever they choose, and if they allow politics, society or religion to influence their values and choices they are acting in 'bad faith'.

It is not difficult to see the appeal of this kind of thinking, not least because it massages the ego and opens up endless possibilities for self-gratification — but Sartre was not finished. Some previous thinkers had argued that, although God could be ruled out of court, it was important to hold on to morality based on traditional theism. Quite rightly, Sartre would have none of this and taught that in rejecting God man had no option but to go it alone. In *Existentialism and Humanism* he wrote, 'And when we speak of "abandonment" — a favourite word of Heidegger — we only mean to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end.' In the same work he

underlined the point: 'Existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position.' The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, who died in 1881, had written, 'If God does not exist, everything would be permitted,' a statement which Sartre called 'the starting-point' of existentialism. In his view, atheists who attempted to hold on to theistically based morality were trying to have their cake and eat it. He insisted that men who reject God must work out their own values, make their own choices, and live with the consequences. As Sartre saw it, men were not basically good or evil, because there were no values other than those they created for themselves.

However, far from opening the door to a blissful, unthreatened Utopia, Sartre saw that this line of approach resulted in human prospects becoming increasingly bleak. At one stage he wrote, 'If God does not exist... man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon, either within or outside himself.' In other words, by ruling out God man finds himself without any other means of support. The story is told of an amateur mountain climber who fell off a steep precipice. Hurling towards the ground hundreds of feet below, he managed to grab a solitary little bush growing on the side of the mountain, but the bush could not bear his weight and began to work loose from its roots. In utter terror, the climber looked to the sky and screamed, 'Is there anyone there who can help me?' To his amazement, a voice from the clouds said, 'Yes, I can help you, but you must trust me. Let go of the bush.' After a quick glance around him, the climber shouted, 'Is there anyone else up there who can help?' This was the kind of dilemma Sartre found he had created.

Even the freedom which he assigned to individual human beings proved to be a liability rather than an asset. In the first place it was limited by what Sartre called 'facticity', the body, ability and other factors which go to make up the current situation of the person concerned. Even more depressingly, without a Creator or any outside reference-point by which to assess meaning or values, man's freedom is a farce. Far from being liberated, Sartre said man is 'condemned to be free'. As he explained, 'My freedom is the unique foundation of values. And since I am the being by virtue of whom values exist, nothing — absolutely nothing — can justify me in adopting this or that value or scale of values. As the unique basis of the existence of values, I am totally unjustifiable. And my freedom is in the anguish in finding that it is the baseless basis of values.'

Bluntly put, Sartre had reached the point where values had no value. All the energy poured into the attempt to live an 'authentic' life was like water sprinkled on sand. 'Man,' he concluded, 'is a useless passion.' It is only a short step from there to believing that the whole of life is irrational, meaningless and absurd — and Sartre took it. In his first and most famous novel *Nausea*, one of his characters, Roquentin, questions his right to exist at all and goes on, 'I existed like a stone, a plant, a microbe... I was just thinking... that here we are, all of us, eating and drinking, to preserve our precious existence and there's nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.' Sartre's bleak philosophy condemns everyone else to the same meaningless fate: 'Every existent is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance.' In his best-known philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explored the question, 'What is it like to be a human being?' and came to the conclusion that, as there was no explanation for the existence of anything, man must accept the fact that he has been dumped into a meaningless universe and is caught between 'the absurdity of life's origin and the fear of life's extinction'. As R. C. Sproul comments, 'Sartre's grim conclusion is that all of our caring, our concerns, our deepest

aspirations are empty of significance. Human life is meaningless. It is a cosmic joke and a cold, indifferent universe is the comedian.'

### **Theory is one thing ...**

Not surprisingly, Sartre proved unable to apply his convictions with any consistency. As an entrenched existentialist, he claimed to be passionately committed to the idea of individual human autonomy, yet he strongly supported the Marxist cause, which in practice smothered the freedom of the individual in the interests of the state. All eight leaders of the Angka Loeu ('Higher Organization') who masterminded the horrendous blood-letting in Cambodia in 1975 had absorbed their ideas of 'necessary violence' while studying in France in the 1950s; in Paul Johnson's words, 'They were Sartre's children.' Again, although he taught that ethics was an irrelevance, he became actively involved in the protest against the French occupation of Algeria, calling it an unjust and dirty war. He paid dearly for this U-turn; as soon as he signed the Algerian Manifesto he was regarded as an apostate, and lost his leadership of the avant garde. On a more intimate level, while claiming that his personal credo was 'Travel, polygamy, transparency', he had his publisher secretly prepare four copies of one of his books, each one bearing the name of one of his four current mistresses and indicating that she was the person to whom the book was dedicated.

It is fascinating to place other glimpses of Sartre's own private experience alongside his public announcements. At one point, he wrote of how his religious upbringing had ironically contributed to his atheism. Everyone in and around his family believed in God 'for reasons of discretion', and 'An atheist was a fanatic whom you did not invite to dinner lest he "created a scandal".' Baptized and registered as a Roman Catholic, he confessed, 'Deep down it all bored me to death... yet I believed: in my heart, kneeling on my bed, hands folded, I said my daily prayer but thought less and less about the good God... For several years longer I kept up public relations with the Almighty; in private, I stopped associating with him...'

In the same autobiographical passage he wrote of an occasion when he was at home playing with matches and accidentally burned a mat in the bathroom. While trying to cover up the evidence he had an overwhelming sense that God was watching him: 'I felt his gaze upon my head and upon my hands.' He reacted angrily at feeling that he was 'a living target' and from then on his alienation from God accelerated. 'Unable to take root in my heart, he vegetated in me for a while and then died.' Even more telling are his feelings about the incident many years later: 'Fifty years ago, without that misunderstanding, without that mistake, without the accident which separated us, there might have been something between us. Nothing happened between us... Atheism is a cruel, long-term business: I believe I have gone through it to the end.'

The 'cruel, long-term business' was marked by what Paul Johnson calls 'extraordinary squalor, selfishness, confusion, cruelty and, not least, cowardice', and his final years, sadly darkened by blindness, were 'squalid bordering on the horrific'. Yet there was a final, surprising twist. For years, Sartre had unleashed a torrent of atheistic literature but, a few months before he died, he wrote in a left-wing journal, 'I do not feel that I am the product of chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone who was expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being whom only a Creator could put here: and this idea of a creating hand refers to God.' That one brief statement turned Sartre's lifelong commitment to atheistic existentialism on its head. Simone de Beauvoir, his last mistress (and one of his earliest),

was so shocked by this that, having given all the right signals at his funeral, she published *La cérémonie des adieux*, in which she mounted a vicious attack on Sartre and described his statement as 'this senile act of a turncoat'. Maybe — or did the blind old thinker finally see something he had missed in seventy-five years of searching?

Whether or not Sartre had an eleventh-hour conversion, he died as an icon of atheism and his funeral cortège was followed by thousands who had been influenced by his teaching. Today, millions of people (most of them without knowing it) are root-and-branch existentialists, in spite of the glaring weaknesses which questions like these expose:

- Although existentialism brilliantly reveals the human predicament, it provides no solutions. What can it offer the insecure, the lonely, the guilty and the fearful?
- How can existentialism sensibly distinguish between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' experience? Colin Brown pinpoints the problem: 'If the world is irrational, and there are no objective values, how can playing bingo be described as less authentic than listening to Beethoven? To prefer one rather than the other is purely a matter of personal taste.'
- In the absence of values and rationality in the world, how can we possibly 'authenticate' ourselves?
- If, as Kierkegaard put it, 'truth is subjectivity', how can we be sure we are getting the right message when it conflicts with other people's claims? Specifically, how can I contradict someone else's conviction that God exists?
- Sartre argues that man can be autonomous only if there is no God, but how can this be proved without first demonstrating that God does not exist?
- Sartre claims that getting rid of God makes genuine morality possible, but might it not be easier to show that Sartre's morality makes the non-existence of God necessary? In other words, does it not seem that Sartre's denial of God is wishful thinking?
- Sartre stands firmly against the existence of any objective values, but shoots himself in the foot by insisting that becoming 'authentic' (by asserting one's own freedom and creating one's own meaning) is creditable. But how can we call anything creditable if there is no objective standard by which to judge it?
- If pessimistic existentialism is right to say that everything is meaningless, would this not include its claim that this is the case? If not, what else might be excluded from the claim?
- If our actions have no ultimate meaning, why should giving to charity be considered more worthy than robbing a bank? Morally speaking, what do the words 'good', 'bad', 'better' and 'worse' mean?
- Because it is soaked in subjectivity, existentialism fails to give anything like enough weight to reason, science and the objective world. Can we honestly say that sensations, moods, emotions and personal opinions are the only things which constitute reality?
- How is it possible for a self-authenticating person to live with other self-authenticating people? What happens when my (self-authenticated) freedom conflicts with someone else's?
- If everyone practised atheistic existentialism and 'did his own thing', surely the result would be total and universal anarchy? Does any existentialist seriously believe that he could live in such a world?

- One last question: is man's relentless search for freedom, meaning, dignity, significance and values not exactly what we would expect to find if he had in fact been created by a God who is the ultimate reference-point for all of these?

Extract from 'Does God Believe in Atheists' by John Blanchard