Ethical Philosophy...In Practice

Thinking Clearly in a World of Nonsense

Topic for July 12, 2015

Christian Existentialism

Summary

The word existentialism is thrown around, probably because it sounds cool, so we might as well too. It’s the 18th / 19th century philosophy, popularized by Nietzsche and Sartre, that the purpose of life is not given us by God, so each person must find it for himself.

By existential standards, an ethical person accepts this fact, consciously picks a purpose for himself and plays the game of life. An unethical person is one who hides from this truth, usually in social myths such as religion, nationalism, etc.

There are two types: (1) theistic and (2) atheistic. Soren Kierkegaard started it all in the 1850’s with a series of small books such as Sickness Unto Death, Fear and Trembling and Either/Or. Many of our terms (leap of faith, despair, meaning of life, etc.) were coined by him or his successors. Kierkegaard was a Christian existentialist.

The word is often used today to imply that something is very fundamental or anxiety laden, which is true but that’s not its original meaning. It means that existence (life) comes before any purpose for it. We were not put on earth with a set, externally given purpose.
The Inevitable Development of Existentialism

Our Need For Meaning - Human beings must believe that there is some meaning or purpose to their lives. (Why get up in the morning? What’s the point?) Seriously, our need for meaning is very real and powerful. We must have a reassuring cultural nest or we flip out. Jung, Tolstoy and others have, suddenly realizing that all their beliefs were only cultural myths, lost their sense of reality and literally collapsed. It could happen to anyone at any time, whenever he is psychologically strong enough. For Tolstoy it was on the way to the bathroom. Jung said that it usually leads to insanity or suicide. To avoid it, most people rely upon...

Theism - Our ancestors had their gods to tell them what to do >>> just like today’s Christians, Muslims, etc. A one-size-fits-all, off-the-shelf purpose in living (given by a god) is called theism. In Christendom, man’s purpose was to believe in God, pray to Jesus or Mary, give money to the church, obey the pope and king, die and go to heaven. It worked for most people, but then...

Naturalism - Science began discovering how the universe works. It makes all sorts of useful things possible, like toilets and cell phones. But science does not tell us why we’re here or say anything reassuring. It does not confirm our gods or tell us we are special and destined for eternal happiness\(^1\). At first, only the educated few knew this, so they kept it a secret. Finally guys like Nietzsche and Freud publicized it, much to the horror of the ruling elite. (They warned it would mean social chaos. People would stop laboring in the fields for the elite if they knew there was no payoff in heaven.) Ultimately it did lead to nihilism.

Nihilism is the terrible realization that universe was not created for us. We humans are just flickering blinks in the vast darkness. We have no purpose or future. This is NOT a happy psychological place. (Nietzsche summed it up with “God is dead.”)

1) nothing

2) nothing

Such was the shockingly unhappy state of educated Europeans at the end of the 19th century. That is the context into which was born, the antidote for nihilism, which is …

\(^1\) That’s was not because it didn’t try God know. Scientists tried very hard for centuries, they were all good Catholics. But damned, they have just not been able to find anything reassuring that the universe has to say to us.
Existentialism - Addressing the malaise of the nihilistic worldview, Kierkegaard and later, Sartre, Camus, etc. offered a way to transcend the despair. It says that:

A. the Universe is vast, mechanical and does not care about us
B. it is so uncaring, to us it looks "absurd" (for want of a better word)
C. we were NOT created for a purpose, our lives have no external meaning
D. since we weren't given meaning, WE HAVE TO FIND it for ourselves
E. the authentic person accepts that fact and find meaning in his life
F. it is an individual journey that every honest person must take.

Thought Experiment: 19th Century (and earlier) Europeans were raised in a heavy Christian culture. The icons, symbols, taboos, rituals, theology, etc. were thick and pervasive. They made us the center of the universe, the special creation of a protecting father. To hear that it is all nonsense was terrifying. Today however, many people find that view not so alien or threatening.

How does it seem to you?

Christian Existentialism

Kierkegaard started this whole line of thought in the 1850's without even knowing it, in fact nobody did until the 1930's. He is considered the first existentialist long before the word was coined. He wrote pamphlets about how God must exist but he couldn't prove it. Since life (for him) was intolerable without God, he just took a leap of faith. Believe in God without proof, because well,

it is the only solution to “despair” or “sickness.”

In Sickness unto Death, he asserts that people have eternal life with god and a refusal to believe it is the sickness. It is an "intentional" “sickness of the soul” caused by a “fundamental fear of conscious selfhood.” He called that “despair.”

The “self” is a huge thing with K and he was fascinated with his own. He felt Christianity must be between God and the individual self. The modern world and especially Denmark's state church, was soul numbing. It robbed people of their individual selves. (This echoes the Luddite's complaints with industrialization.)

Acceptance of the self alone was vital with K. He was big on singleness, aloneness, the individual standing alone. He was very critical of mass religion, and every thing else for that matter. To paraphrase a popular song,
"it's all about the self, bout the self, no churches."

Consciousness of the self requires that a person first become conscious of God (p. 8) and then “answer directly to God.” (p. 7) He really yearned to be stripped naked before a harsh judge, probably his very stern and guilt ridden father. The more a person looses his social identity, the more he can occupy a solitary position before God.

Unlike how the word sickness is usually meant, this sickness is a good thing. Although painful, it the only avenue "for truth and deliverance.” Our sports motto "no pain no gain” phrase captures its meaning. It is an acknowledgement of the individual's "dependence upon God."

Christian Existential Ethics - A good existential Christian would

A. scour his soul daily,
B. stand naked before God,
C. turn away from groupthink activities like Churches and
D. focus on an intense, personal relationship with God.

His ideas about self-consciousness are commonly interpreted as referring to the human ability, even compulsion, to define itself. The editor of my book believes that K meant that self-consciousness is the developed awareness of his despair. People typically hide from their despair in psychological ways, thus avoiding the realization that it is their failure to follow the ideal, yada, yada, yada. The nuanced nonsense flows on, tumbles forth in an unending stream of pointless jabber. (my opinion) K was wandering around the darkened corridors of his own neurotic mind, finding ideas that made him feel good (gave him some relief from his neurotic feelings) for the moment.

...life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards....

--Soren Kierkegaard

2 There is no way that cannot be sexual.
3 Kierkegaard spent his inheritance publishing small books which he handed out on street corners. He was such a famous local crank that the newspapers published caricatures of him. When he ran out of money, he died in 1855 at age 42. Nobody paid the slightest attention to him. Absurd isn't it?
Major Themes That Evolved In Christian Existentialism

(A) Return to More Authentic Christianity - People should return to the fundamental principles of grace, humility and love. (This reporter cannot find those ideas as major themes in the New Testament. However the joy of having a large source document like the Bible is that you can find in it, whatever you want.)

(B) Equate God with Love - Once again, not in the four gospels, at all. In those day to those people, God was a real thing and not big on love, except you expressing yours for Him.

(C) Accept the Eternal Nature of the Soul - To fail to come to the realization of one's eternal life creates despair.

(D) Become NAKED Before God - The only way to judge one's actions is to hold oneself up to divine scrutiny. But the choice ultimately is the individual's.

His thinking lead to Christian existentialists like Karl Barth and Reinhold Neiburhr. (Niebuhr's book Moral Man In An Immoral Society is profound, really worth reading and has nothing to do with gods.) The personal and vulnerable god experience that we are familiar with today (the born again phenomena) is a fairly new thing. It developed with the Protestant Reformation and the Methodist movements of the early 1800's.

Atheistic Existentialism

Step 1 the "absurd" - Sartre (1905-1980) says that we humans experience life in two different ways, objectively and subjectively. objectively we experience it with our thinking, the material world, how it operates; etc. Subjectively we experience our feelings, our psychological relationship to it. To each individual, life is very personal.

(Objectively the world looks so utterly indifferent to us that it offends our subjective feelings. Death, disease, insanity, mindless evolution, supernova, black holes, you name it, it’s not reassuring. It’s so unnoticing of us that it is absolutely outrageous! Sartre calls it “absurd, and just look at him. >>>)

Step 2 Freedom - The Universe really is without meaning or purpose. A person is not bounded by pre-existing values, God didn’t put him here to do _X_. So, he is totally free. (He can jump off a cliff or believe he is Zeus, whatever).

That degree of freedom is terrifying! He hides from it. But with that freedom he can find his own personal meaning in life. (He either finds it himself or practices “bad faith.”)
Step 3 “Bad Faith” or self deception is the willingness of the individual to deceive himself about the absurdity of life and the power and freedom he really has. It’s a low, base, unethical way to live. People avoid thinking about it in all sorts of way, like pretending that it’s something silly...

In contrast, Christian Existentialism starts with the same realization, except this time about God. He is not reachable for us so...suck it up and make a leap of faith, believe in God even without evidence. Yes, the universe may appear meaningless; so just jump on God’s bandwagon.

Step 4 Ethics - Existential morality says suck it up, admit the obvious and make a conscious choice, then act on it. It will give your life meaning. (Meaning is a psychological experience, right? Meaning doesn’t exist outside of us, it’s something we feel. That’s the point of existentialism. It must have been pretty persuasive; lots of people believe that today.)

Any decision you consciously make is right! Right?

Following the herd is unethical. So, grow a pair and pick a team. Then don’t whine if your choice was bad. An “authentic” person refuses to accept meaninglessness and says in effect “Screw you universe-without-meaning, I will find meaning for myself!”

Reinhard Heydrich comes to mind as someone who was existentially moral. He came from a long famous, wealthy and aristocratic musical family. Talented, educated and privileged, he could have chosen any career. So he thought it over and decided to join the Nazi Party in order to dedicate his life to the highest of all callings...killing Jews⁴. Right...sure, no, wait, what?

Hey, it was his choice out of many options, so it was existentially moral. On the other hand, Lutherans, Catholics, gypsies, etc. who stayed in their cultural traditions (without conscious decisions to do so) showed “bad faith.” If life has no meaning or purpose and we all going to die in an obscure planet which will be consumed by the sun and then vanish into eternal darkness, what’s the difference?

Could he be taking this whole meaningless thing a little too far?

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⁴ Conceptualizing many people into a single category, such as Poles, Jews, black people, white people, etc.; and then punishing many for the actions of a few is called collective guilt. It was universal in the Old Testament and very popular with the Nazi’s. Although psychology intuitive, it is unjust, wrong-headed and outlawed by the Geneva Convention. It seems to be coming back in style in America with our War on Terror and White Privilege theories.
Some Odd Things You May Hear About Existentialism and Why

People often say odd but true things about existentialism.

(A) It's not a philosophy or coherent school of thought. It was developed over a century by people from different countries. They have been bunched together because of similar themes.

(B) It's a rebellion, a defiant cry of anger and refusal to submit. It is that and proud of it! Screw you meaningless universe!

(C) None of them would have called themselves “existentialists.” The word wasn't invented until Sartre, long after Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. But in retrospect, many of their themes are similar. That is why they are bunched together under the title of “existentialists.”

(D) All of them would violently disagreed with each other about everything. They were mostly angry loners who couldn't tolerate the intimacy of anyone understanding them.

(E) It's assumed to be very obscure and depressing. It is certainly that! Thinking is not for everyone. If you feel compelled to do it, hide it. It will make the sleeping zombies around you less dangerous. We want them to sleep!

(F) There are many aspects (see terms) below. It seems to this reporter that most philosophers/people (with the possible exception of Einstein) cannot make just one contribution. They have to keep on writing and often embarrass themselves before posterity. For example, Newton spent most of his life studying alchemy and predicting the end of the world from the Old Testament. Descartes dabbled in medicine trying to find eternal life.

Thought Experiment: Does it really say anything more important than “man up and play the game?” On the other hand, it seems a psychological mechanism that once a painful fact is accepted consciously, it’s easier to move on. As Scott Peck wrote “life is difficult, once you accept that everything is easier.” Recognizing that psychological function was profound. All western religions and institutions are about not accepting unpleasant evidence. Williams James founded pragmatism on it.

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5 Reinhardt was very self-assured and fearless. He executed non-Aryans on-the-spot and without hesitation. Hitler loved him. On a trip to Poland, bomb throwing would-be assassins attacked his car. He survived and chased after them with his revolver, on foot. Although not seriously injured, horse hair from his Mercedes Benz seat was blown into his body. He died of an infection a few days later. The assassination plot was organized by the British Government but is now considered of questionable value. The Germans executed thousands of Polish villagers in retaliation. How many innocents do you kill in order to get guilty bad guy? All wars begin with the same answer, it doesn’t matter.
Other Existential Thinkers

Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus popularized it. Also there are pieces of it in Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Heidegger, Jaspers, William James even Socrates and the ancients.

Thought Experiment: Buddhists say that we are all in a life raft in the middle of the ocean. Once we accept that fact that there’s no shore and no rescue, all we have is our compassion for each other. The existentialists say the same but conclude that all we have is to pick a game and play it. But couldn’t that be said of anything? There’s no rescue, so...have sex, sleep, kill yourself? Well, anything you choose would be existential, taking an action. But believing in a god which means there is a rescue coming, that’s bad faith. Right? (So, throw the theistic existentialists out of life boat.)

Are you an existentialist?

Richard Mohley
June 23, 2015

I give Christian Existentialism a D.

He started an important journey, but on the wrong foot in the wrong direction.

What do you think?

Sebastian J. Stirt
June 22, 2015

Later Reflections

Kierkegaard was clearly unwell. He imagined a finite life (not protecting by deities) to be unbearable. So, he simply declared himself to be immortal.

In this, he found solace. However, that “leap of faith” did not solve his underlying problem, so he kept on fusing and writing. Over a few years he explored his inner psychological terrain and announced absolute certainties. Lingering doubts he labeled a “sickness.” The “self” he declared to be a thing, which if explored, would lead to standing naked before God. All

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6 He had a economically comfortable but painful childhood. His father was a stern, guilt ridden Scandinavian protestant. His mother and 5 sibling died. He was engaged to be married, but broke it off for unknown reasons. He prided himself in being a social outcast, railed at the world around him, never worked but lived off his inheritance until it ran out. He said cheery things about himself like the depth of my misery is only equaled by my ability to hide it and “I do not reflect, I AM reflection.”

7 Why the idea of standing naked appealed to him, he apparently didn’t explore.
that is fine and good if you like that sort of thing, but why should he be so famous?

Could it be that when existentialism was the rage, when all the clever people were talking trash and listening to beat jazz in coffee shops, the Christians wanted to get in on the game? They could also claim to be existentialists, but for God!

That sort of PR updating goes on constantly; when the old ideas no longer sell. Only last week I heard Christian Radio announce that there is no such thing as race, it’s all melatonin shades caused by genes. Ha! Go tell that to the Southern Baptist Convention of the 1950’s, or last week. But one day they will claim that they always believed it. Just like they all now claim they were for civil rights and against the Vietnam war.

What strikes this reporter as odd, is how most people never get it. I’ve discussed this with many folk and most believe that laws, rules, customs, nations, cities, morals, gods, principles etc. actually exist in reality. For example, in Roe v Wade the court discovered a new civil right, existing before but only just discovered. If you ask the more educated types, they usually say oh, you just mean cultural fictions.

But 99% of everything we do, believe, say, work on, live within, strive for, etc. are only fictions. If it really hits a person, it blows his mind. Sartre and Tolstoy described it. Everyone else seems like zombie sleep walkers. The power and freedom that you suddenly see that you have, is terrifying. It’s so scary that people try very hard not to see it. We infantilized ourselves with loads of help from social institutions.

But then, much human behavior makes sense. For example, millions eagerly die fighting for imaginary nations, gods, principles etc. because they think they are real!

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8 Sartre’s famous example was how you feel when you stand on the edge of a cliff or balcony. That uneasy feeling in the pit of your stomach is your realization that you could jump. Nothing is there to stop you.
Existentialists As Human Beings

When looking at existentialism and its followers as a whole, the whole thing seems less like a philosophy than a psychological type, like Asperger's Syndrome. Many had similar attitudes, such as:

A. I am too smart for anyone to every understand me.  
   (That would be more intimacy/vulnerability than I can stand)
B. I alone face terrible truths.  (The rest of you are all cowards.)
C. I am a self-absorbed egotistical prick.  (Not a very pleasant person.)