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JEAN-PAUL SATRE AND THE RESURGENCE OF EXISTENTIALISM

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Existentialism was a philosophy that I, as a young apologist, needed to answer in 1976 and for a number of years after. It was in the air. Francis Schaeffer wrote and spoke much about the atheist worldviews of Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and other existentialists. I taught and critiqued basic atheistic existentialism as a young teacher in a secular setting, as an older teacher in a Christian setting, and, more recently, as an aging codger at a secular university. Existentialism's heyday in the United States was in the 1950s through about the early 1970s. In much of Europe after World War II, it offered a new philosophy to help bring life out of the ashes. I taught on existentialism in apologetics courses for about fifteen years. Nevertheless, around the time existentialism was fading from my teaching, it made a comeback — primarily through the rediscovery of the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980).

Defenders of biblical faith need to discern the intellectual spirit of the times: those worldviews that seem to be live options for thinking people. Let us imitate the tribe of "Issachar, men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (1 Chron. 12:32 NIV). Therefore, we return to Sartre and existentialism as a challenge to the gospel that must be answered that we might "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people" (Jude 3 NIV). My criticism will center on Sartre's view of human nature.

WHAT IS EXISTENTIALISM, AND WHY IS IT COMING BACK?

Existentialism is a broad movement of thinkers who focus closely on the nature and meaning of human existence, particularly subjectivity and our relationships to other people. Existentialists consider subjects such as freedom, anxiety, sexuality, and other human emotions in philosophical terms. We find these distinctive themes in many philosophers, but the father of existentialism is Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), a Lutheran Christian. The melancholy Dane was an orthodox Christian, but addressed

human faith and unbelief from the standpoint of psychology instead of from a thorough theology or traditional apologetic. Since Kierkegaard, existentialists have been divided into two camps: theistic (e.g., Gabriel Marcel and Martin Buber) and atheistic (e.g., Nietzsche, Camus, Sartre, and Simone Weil).¹

Today, Sartre seems to be the existentialist of the hour. Of all the existentialists, he was the most visible as an existentialist, since he defended it in a short and fairly readable book called *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. His massive and ponderous work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943) is something of a textbook on existentialism. The British philosopher Gary Cox has popularized Sartre in recent years. Besides his more academic works, he has published a number of short, readable, and snappy titles, such as *How to Be an Existentialist; The Existentialist's Guide to Death, the Universe, and Everything*, and his exculpatory biography of Sartre, *Existentialism and Excess*.² The magazines *Philosophy Now* and *The Philosopher's Magazine* have dedicated theme issues to existentialism. Sarah Bakewell's book, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Others* was one of the *New York Times's* ten best books of 2016. The whiff of existentialism is back in the air — and it smells like a Sartre cigarette.

But why is this? I surmise that existentialism fills an existential need for significance in light of the current nonreligious worldviews on offer. Secular postmodernism seems to be in cultural decline. Further, it can never grant a coherent identity to human beings, having submerged them in relative cultural groupings not of their own choosing: language games, interpretive communities, ethnic identities, and more. Contrariwise, scientific materialists, such as Richard Dawkins, give no inspiration for human uniqueness either, since their view of science exposes us as no more than biologically driven animals. In their minds, culture reduces to biology, and biology reduces to mindless matter. That hardly warms the blood or fills the sails with lofty aspirations, atheistic claims notwithstanding.

Jean Paul Sartre's Existentialism

Existentialism, however, claims that humans, as free and responsible beings, are unique. The subjective *I* is not swamped by culture or dissolved into matter. My first-person experience is immune to alien definitions and defamations. Sartre's philosophy starts from human subjectivity, the "I think," which he took from Rene Descartes. But unlike Descartes, he did not work his way to God's existence from his own.³ For Sartre, atheism was essential to existentialism. If God existed, then people would not be free. But we are free, so there is no God. This is a bad argument, but it is his starting point.⁴ In God's absence, what could fill the place of God? Sartre claims that we are all we have.

Consider his most famous three words from *Existentialism and Human Emotions*: "Existence precedes essence."

What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have determined what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence.⁵

Sartre argues that without God and a “heaven of ideas,” we cannot ground the idea of a set human nature. In this, we are “forlorn.” Human beings cannot appeal to anything above them to give their lives meaning or direction. Unlike the Christian, existentialists do not have an *infinite and personal reference point* in the one true God.⁶ Therefore, Sartre denies any essential human substance or form. Humans are mysterious upsurges of freedom in an otherwise materialistically conditioned world. Sartre cannot explain this upsurge, since it is absurd, not being grounded in a Creator and Designer.

Sartre claims that it is inauthentic to appeal to any set of conditions — divine or otherwise — that would determine who a human being is or what a human being does. One cannot blame one’s heredity or cultural surroundings for one’s actions or attitudes. In order to defend his notion of freedom, Sartre must reject human nature, since it would constrain humans and deny their autonomy. Sartre takes it to be “bad faith” to seek guidance or solace in some “heaven of ideas,” since it does not exist and would, supposedly, deny man’s radical freedom to create his own identity.

CRITIQUING SARTRE: DOES EXISTENCE PRECEDE ESSENCE?

In asserting that “existence precedes essence,” Sartre’s whole philosophy runs aground. First, he gives no compelling argument against the existence of God and ignores the classic arguments for God. Since he appealed mostly to secular Europeans, he felt no such need. However, philosophers in recent decades have refined and expanded natural theology’s claim that belief in God is warranted on the basis of many elements in the universe. Several of these arguments draw from well-established facts in cosmology, physics, and biology.⁷ If *any* of these arguments for God’s existence succeeds, Sartre’s project fails, since atheism is a necessary condition for his existentialism.

Second, the logic of “existence precedes essence” is unconvincing. Sartre would have us believe that an unformed collection of states (“existence”) can form itself or create itself into an essence. This is akin to water rising above its source or creating a perpetual motion machine. An essence cannot be created by that which lacks an

essence. This is precisely because there would be nothing there to do the creating. You cannot get blood from a turnip — even an existentialist turnip.

An existentialist could claim, notwithstanding, that some humans actualize an essence through the projects of their lives. Thus, the essence of Picasso was that of a painter. But even here, it was evident that Picasso was natively gifted as a painter (surpassing his artist father's ability while he was still a child) and acted out of these human and distinctively individual propensities. If so, Picasso did not create his own *essence*; rather, he formed an *identity* over time by acting on his abilities and making certain kinds of choices in light of them. The great painter's life may also be subjected to moral norms appropriate for all human beings as established by their Creator (Eccl. 12:13–14).

Sartre wants to reverse nearly the entire history of philosophy, which has affirmed that humanity has a nature. A certain cluster of properties is native to, and constitutive of, humans. It is not by convention that we refer to certain creatures as *humans*. There are things that make humans to be humans. What these qualities are is debated, but we could not successfully refer to *humans* unless they all shared some essence. We do not and cannot determine our own essence, although we are responsible for how we live our lives. On the contrary, whatever humans are, they must act out of their essence, for there is nothing else available from which to act. We cannot create ourselves from nothing.

Yet Sartre says that humans are “the desire to be god.” “The best way to conceive of the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God....To be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God.”⁸ That is, we desire to have existence as our essence, just as God's essence is to exist.

As finite beings, however, we can neither possess nor attain any such thing. In fact, we are “condemned to be free,” since our freedom never finds fulfillment in any objective meaning. Sartre is right in that fallen humans desire to be independent of the one true God, and so labor vainly to be gods themselves. This was the heart of the serpent's temptation made to our first parents (Gen. 3:1–7; see also Ezek. 28:1–10). However, inasmuch as Sartre claims that humans are defined as the desire to be God, he is affirming that we have a nature after all. Our essence or nature is to strive for the impossible. But if all humans strive for the impossible, then they all have something in common — something that makes us who we are, however different each of us may be. If man is fundamentally *anything*, then he has a nature after all. But this contradicts Sartre's premise that man has no nature. When any worldview is internally inconsistent, it is, therefore, false.

Sartre affirms another essential quality about humans in order to try to escape the charge that existentialism is really nihilism. Sartre agrees with Dostoevsky's character Ivan from *The Brothers Karamazov*, who Sartre paraphrases as saying, “If God does not exist, then everything is permitted.”⁹ However, Sartre tries to pull back from nihilism by saying that each human must be responsible for all humanity and act before

the audience of all humanity.¹⁰ But this rings hollow, since *humanity* is not a category allowed by Sartre's philosophy. If our existence precedes essence, then we define and create ourselves with no cosmic game plan or human blueprint available. Moreover, if there is no God and no human nature, we need not consider the rest of humanity or what other humans would think of our lives. Once again, Sartre is logically inconsistent.

THE CHRISTIAN ALTERNATIVE

The existentialism of Sartre is riddled with further problems, but our survey brings his philosophy into serious question. Unlike Sartre, Christians know that their existence is based on the design plan of the Creator, who made us in His image and likeness, thus giving us dignity and purpose. Despite our fallen ways, God deigned to offer redemption from sin and futility through Jesus Christ. Sartre to the contrary, there is no need for man to try to be God, since God has become man for our sake. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9 NIV).

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NOTES

- 1 For an overview, see James W. Sire, "Beyond Nihilism: Existentialism," *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).
- 2 Sartre was a rogue. He abused drugs and alcohol and was a sexual libertine. With no moral absolutes, anything goes for Sartre, except giving excuses. Sartre was also a Marxist who excused Communism well after he should have known it was tyrannical and murderous.
- 3 See Douglas Groothuis, "Descartes: I Think therefore I Am," *Philosophy in Seven Sentences* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).
- 4 Only God gives objective meaning to human responsibility. Sartre's idea is that of freedom in an impersonal void.
- 5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1985), 9.
- 6 This term is used by Francis Schaeffer in several places.
- 7 See James Sennett and Douglas Groothuis, eds., *In Defense of Natural Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005); William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
- 8 Sartre, *Existentialism*, 56.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 10-11.