

Existential Authenticity in the 21st Century?

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“We are too late for the gods and too early for Being. Being’s poem, just begun, is man. To head toward a star — this only.” — Martin Heidegger

Were it so. Were life – existence – so poetic.

In early 2021, I published a book entitled “Devastation: Philosophy, Existentialism, and Theology in the 21st Century.” In this book, I investigate the viability of pursuing contemporary existential authenticity.

Over the past few years, philosophically-challenged politicians and other global illuminaries have revived the term “existential.” (For example: “Apple Says Your iPhone Is Facing an Existential Threat – From Congress,” *inc.com*, June 23, 2021.) Such pronouncements have created cringeworthy, unhuman Existence Monsters.

Existential? “‘Existential’ is the granddaddy of overused philosophy terms, and it shows no sign of going into retirement.” (Achenbach) “Fancy words go in and out of fashion, posing an existential temptation to overuse. ‘Existential’ is the ‘dumpster fire’ of 2019. Like, literally. Dictionary.com [has] announced ‘existential’ as the word of the year [2019]. In a perfect world, the year 2020 would pose an existential threat to the careless use of ‘existential’ and the apocalyptic drama it promotes. With its word of the year status, we should leave ‘existential’ to exist existentially as the dumpster fire relic of an oddly hyperbolic era-gone-by. Literally.” (Laugesen) Pretty funny stuff. But 2020 and 2021 have proved to be anything but funny.

As a quick refresher, the study of “existentialism” flourished in European and American academic settings, artistic circles, and pop culture in the late 1940s, the 1950s, and the 1960s. But then it began a slow decline in popularity for the next half century or so. Yet remarkably, and while these things are hard to measure, interest in existentialism seems to be experiencing

something of a revival. (Or maybe this is just wishful thinking.) Yet, it has been suggested that the whole “existentialist aesthetic” is making a roaring comeback. [See, for example, Gerald Walton Paul’s article “Revival of Existentialism” in *The Kingston Whig Standard* or Carmen Lea Dege’s “2020’s Existentialist Turn” in *The Boston Review*.] Moreover, a most remarkable series of 10 videos (recorded in 1961) by philosophy professor Hazel Barnes – “Self-Encounter: A Study in Existentialism” – have recently (mid-2021) begun resurfacing on YouTube. (Barnes)

Both Paul and Dege suggest the resurgence of interest in existentialism is not entirely surprising in that the body of work we now think of as existentialist emerged during the conflict-ridden, mid-20th century, where uncertainty permeated every dimension of society. Now, in the early 21st century, some thinkers are suggesting that a similarly intense “uncertainty” is again infiltrating society — on a global scale — and eventuating something of a neo-existentialism revival. These thinkers point to a “profound new wave of social and personal uncertainty. On the one hand, and for the most part, people have expressed an urge to restore certainty...and prefer to be certain about the future, however grim it may be. On the other hand, there have also been [neo-existentialist] responses that attempt to find [a way forward] in the admission of not knowing and in a form of hope ‘inextricable from uncertainty’ as it opens up a critical space to imagine and build the future.” (Dege) [In existential parlance, “preferring certainty about the future” might be characterized as “inauthenticity” while “building-forward in the face of inextricable uncertainty” might be termed “authenticity.”]

In any case, existentialism can be said to be a form of philosophical or theological inquiry that explores the problems of human existence focusing on the lived-experience of the thinking, feeling, acting individual. In many versions of existentialism, a central concern is “Angst” [German for “anxiety”]: a sense of disorientation, confusion, or dread in the face Death in an apparently meaningless, absurd, and haunting world. Other thinkers, however, maintain that attempting to define existentialism is wrongheaded and pointless in the first place in that existentialism is better understood as more of an “attitude” that rejects systematic philosophies or neat catch-phrases and definitions; existentialism from this point of view is not a systematic philosophy at all.

Philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard is often considered to be the first existentialist. Kierkegaard (a Christian of sorts) proposed that each individual is solely responsible for giving meaning to his life and living it passionately and sincerely and authentically. Kierkegaard, for example, believed — somewhat uniquely among the standard existentialist VIPs — that Christianity was not a doctrine to be taught, but rather a life to be lived “existentially.” That is, the true Christian (and existential) experience is the relationship one individual can have with God. More generically, and more in line with the general existen-

tial canon, most of Kierkegaard's philosophical and theological work deals with the issues of how one might live as an "individual," giving priority to concrete human reality over abstract thinking and highlighting the importance of personal choice and commitment.

Some other thinkers trace existentialism back to Ancient Greece, and especially to Socrates. Now, Socrates did not provide prescriptive statements about life, e.g., "each individual is responsible for giving meaning to life." Rather, Socrates' most important contribution to philosophy — and existentialism — is his dialectic method, i.e., asking questions about life, but not necessarily finding answers.

Socrates' dialectic method, i.e., Socrates' "existentialism," runs something like this: in a dialogical setting, e.g., a philosophical conversation, questions are asked & answered (concerning this-or-that topic) with the hope — but not the expectation — that more precise understandings of vague ideas and beliefs will be obtained by means of the dialogue. Socrates' method is largely "destructive" in that false beliefs — or logical contradictions — may be exposed. Socratic existential dialogue is only "constructive" in that may lead to further search for truth. Moreover, the principal goal of Socratic dialogue — and why it may be considered to be existential — is to "improve the soul" of the interlocutors by freeing them from unrecognized errors; or indeed, by teaching them the spirit of inquiry. [Socrates' existentialism is perhaps found in his belief that in every dialectical exchange the soul moves away from the sensible world and moves towards the Good.]

One of the better-known French existentialists, Jean-Paul Sartre, "followed existentialist thinkers such as Heidegger ... who had already risen to fame ... with their readings of Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard. Though their work varied in the details, they all shared a type of thinking that rejected religious and political dogma, expressed scorn for academic abstraction, and focused on the finitude and absurdity of human existence." (Dege)

Drilling down just a bit, Sartre's existentialism, inspired by Heidegger's "Being and Time" (1927), introduced most of the motifs that would characterize existentialist thinking: "the tension between the individual and the 'public'; an emphasis on the worldly or 'situated' character of human thought and reason; a fascination with liminal experiences of anxiety, death, [and] the 'nothing'; the rejection of science (and above all, causal explanation) as an adequate framework for understanding human being; and the introduction of 'authenticity' as the norm of self-identity ... [all] tied to the project of self-definition through freedom, choice, and commitment." (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

Then again, it can be argued that existentialism is perennial philosophy. And all real philosophy — certainly any philosophy that is worth discussing in a dive bar — is existentialist in that it "explores the problem of human existence." Conversely, any philosophy that isn't worth discussing in a dive bar isn't existentialism. As bohemian Tom Waits moans: "Don't

you know there ain't no devil / That's just God when he's drunk." (Waits)

Anyway, and in addition to existential philosophy, there is also "existential theology." However, "Because of the diversity of the movement, it is difficult to say much that is illuminating about existentialist theology as a whole. In general, however, these theologians attempt to understand God in relation to the situation of the concretely existing human individual. Their analysis of human existence is one that emphasizes the freedom of individuals to shape their own identities through choices, and the paradoxical, ambiguous, or even absurd character of the reality that humans encounter. Religious faith is seen as closely related to feelings of alienation and despair; faith may grow out of such emotions or it may provide the key to overcoming them, or both these relations may be present at once." (Evans)

I myself am not particularly bothered about whether "existentialism" is an overused expression or not. I *am* excited by the prospect of a 21st century neo-existentialism (or whatever it may be called). As existentialism has been defined in so many ways by so many people and over such a long time, I have no idea if my book "Devastation" – a thought experiment concerned with whether the pursuit of authenticity makes any sense in the early decades of the 21st Century – should be counted as a part of the existential tradition or not, but as a "post-human existential philosophical theology of devastation" it probably fits in somewhere.

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