

Chapter One: The Advent of Existentialism

Current day philosophers exhibit a type of “professional deformation,” i.e., they are concerned with their specialties and neither the traditional definition of philosophy as pursuit of wisdom nor the problem of human existence. Other phrases used in the chapter to describe what is left out of current philosophical concerns: the unique experience of an individual, concrete way of life, total vision of man and cosmos in which life is to be lived, passionate way of life, soul’s search for salvation.

Existentialism is characterized as a philosophy that is based not on a system of concepts, but rather an individual personality. They are among “the greatest of intuitive psychologists,” alleging incompleteness of previous philosophies because they deal with intellectual abstractions and not the richness of lived experience. The issue of faith is cast in individual terms and emphasis is placed on the immediate and qualitative, as well as the existent and the actual.

In conclusion, Barrett claims that 1958 contemporary philosophy, e.g. analytic philosophy and marxism, give a “thin and over simplified” picture of humans, whereas existentialism give a “image of the whole man ... [including] all that is dark and questionable ... in just this respect it is a much more authentic expression of our contemporary experience.”

SUMMARY: The problem is not the specialization of philosophers, but in their preoccupation with certain theories to understand human beings, instead of actual lived experience.

Chapter Two: The Encounter with Nothingness

We are self-conscious about ourselves, in a journalistic sense, but we remain ignorant of “inner facts” of ourselves.

The decline of religion is a central fact in modern history. Religion no longer has the “validity of immediate experience.” In other words, we do not experience the world as divine. If we were still “religious” in this sense, we would interpret the world as divine, e.g., we no longer experience thunder as the anger of the gods, but as an electrical phenomena. Nature has been despiritualized; as a result, our immediate experience of the world is no longer religious. This “decline” can be seen in the historical transformation of a medieval, rational, St. Thomas Aquinas type of catholic faith of God as a first cause of all events on the world into a modern, irrational, Luther type of protestant faith of God as an incomprehensible force.

The rational ordering of society has allowed us to live easily at an extraordinary level of abstraction and externalization. We conceptualize ourselves economically, socially, racially, ethnically, sexually, and religiously in categories that are abstractions from our own individual points of views and as such that only express fragments of ourselves. Also, technologically our lives are filled with an incredible number of external objects that we have incorporated into our lives and use to express ourselves: by our dress, our music, our homes, our cars, our computer identities, our pastimes. “What lies behind those externals – the human person, in its uniqueness and totality – dwindles to a shadow and a ghost.”

Since August of 1914 (the beginning of WW I), Barrett alleges that the modernistic optimism of understanding and progress has ended. Whether it is the persistence of wars or the appearance of technological threats, Barrett alleges that existentialism “is a product of a bourgeois society in a state of dissolution.” The result is a sense of homelessness, where neither religion, science, nor society provides us with the meaning of our lives.

Science and finitude. Science has taught us that reason is historically developed and just a small part of our psychic life. The scientific claims of Bohr and Heisenberg and mathematical claims of Godel point to a limit of what we can know and understand about our world.

SUMMARY: The traditional ways of understanding humanity: religious, social, and scientific have failed. (We are left with seemingly “nothing” with which to understand ourselves.)

Chapter Four: Hebraism and Hellenism

A contrast between (a) an emphasis on law and practice (as activities) and belief (as state of mind), (b) an expression of faith based on a trusting personal relation to God and an expression of reason based on an intellectual understanding of certain propositions, and (c) a commitment to a being and a detached selection of belief.

The evolution of Greek reason from Heraclitus and Parmenides (480 B.C.) to Aristotle (320 B.C.) differentiated and privileged reason over all other types of mental activity. The ideal of knowledge is mathematics where universals are the objects of knowledge, not particulars. Reason also becomes the center of one’s personal identity.

However, there is a problem if human reason is limited. In this case, reason may not, even in principle, be able to understand everything and the traditional defense of the value of reason fails.

SUMMARY: The existentialist critique of reason assumes this Greek ideal of reason and the Hebraic concept of faith is an important precursor of the existentialist emphasis on action.

Chapter Five: Christian Sources

Faith and Reason. Tertullian’s notion of faith involves a paradox. The incarnation and the resurrection can be expressed as contradictory: a person (as divine) lives and also (as human) dies at the same time, but this cannot be so because in Jesus the human and divine are identical. This is anti-rationalism where belief is not to be reconciled with reason, but rejected when it conflicts with faith. Augustine’s *Confessions* are an exploration of who he is. He cannot be identified by either the natural, social, or rational world. The center of his personal identity is in his faith. The medieval issue of voluntarism (the will precedes the intellect) and intellectualism (the intellect precedes the will): voluntarism seems false with respect to what we introspect during deliberative action, e.g., we come to know something first and then decide to do it; but; intellectualism seems to be false in cases of weakness of will where we claim to know what we should do, but our will chooses otherwise.

Existence and essence. There are two questions: (a) is existence or essence primary? and (b) in actual existing things, is there is a real difference between existence and essence? For Plato, essentialism is the primacy of essence and, in actual existing things, there is only existence. For Aquinas, existence is primary to essence and, in actual existing things, there is a real distinction between them. For Duns Scotus, essence is primary over existence and in actual existing things, there is no real distinction between them. On question (a), Aquinas is the existentialist, but on question (b), Scotus is the existentialist. This is because if there is a real distinction between one's essence and existence, then one's identity as, e.g. a rational animal, and the factual conditions of my existence are distinct. This is a dualistic conception of humans.

Pascal. His world was scientific and devoid of religion and meaning. The nature of a human being is "his nothingness, his forlornness, his inadequacy, his impotence and his emptiness." He divided reason, which is limited, from intuition which allows for religious experience.

SUMMARY: Tertullian, Augustine, and voluntarism are all important precursors of elements of Kierkegaard's notion of faith. The existence/essence issue preshadows Sartre's distinction. Pascal foreshadows the existentialist attitude and the acceptance of the chapter two conclusion.

Chapter Three: The Testimony of Modern Art

Modern art is controversial. On the surface, modern art is seen visually bare or intellectually nihilistic. On a deeper level, it is a manifesto to break through what it deems empty abstractions and sentimentality to return us to the brute world around us. Quantitatively, modern art has expanded the models and media of art to include a wide range of primitive, cross cultural, and everyday objects. Qualitatively, modern art has to a flattening out of planes (of space and time), flattening out of climaxes (no visual center or traditional plot line), and values (nontraditional subjects). Its view of humans has no essence and transcends any image. It presents us with a real encounter with nothingness.

SUMMARY: Modern art rejects traditional media and forms in order to express something more basic and individual. This parallels existentialists' rejection of an ideal of reason and any traditional understanding of human beings in order to "conceptualize" something more basic and individual.

Chapter 6: The Flight From Laputa.

Romantics. An expression of humans as having a being-in, not just a being, so that the natural environment is part of one's being. As we cannot live completely as a being-in, anxiety without a specific object is the result. There are appeals to magic, alchemy, and poetry to overcome this problem.

Russians. Dostoevsky saw contradiction, ambivalence, and irrationality at the center of our nature. We need to rebel against the Enlightenment ideal. For Tolstoy, the reality of death reveals to us an existential truth of our own solitude and the meaninglessness of life.

SUMMARY: Eighteenth and nineteenth literature attempts to address a more basic way of understanding human beings that involves rejecting certain Enlightenment ideals and following a different type of "individual" path.

Kierkegaard/Nietzsche Summary Essay

Both philosophers “ground” their respective views in **existence**. What does this mean? An explanation of this point for SK will concern the objects of first order desires; for FN, it will concern our drives. What is the “traditional” alternative to this grounding? Use Barrett’s chapter one and three for help on this answer.

If this was the extent of their contribution, both SK and FN would be subject to the criticism that our lives would be a meaningless passing from one desire to the next, cp. SK’s notion of an aesthetic type of life, or an anarchy of drives, cp. FN’s critique in the *Twilight of the Idols*. These criticisms are versions of **relativism**.

In order to avoid this criticism, their next step is to focus and concentrate on one particular desire and follow the compulsion of a single taste that was ruling and forming, respectively. If this was the extent of their contribution, both SK and FN would be subject to the following different criticisms. For FN, this single taste can be “objectified” or “rationalized” such that it becomes an objective and/or rational standard by which we are assessed. Use Barrett’s chapter 2 and 4 for help in answering this part. For SK, realizing that obtaining the object of your single desire is beyond your control may lead to what he calls “infinite resignation.” Basically, these are non-existential solutions to relativism.

In order to avoid this criticism, their next move involves accepting in different ways a paradox and trying to go beyond it. SK’s paradox is developed forcefully in his notion of the knight of faith. FN’s paradox is spelled out in aphorism 377 of the **Gay Science** entitled “*We Homeless Ones*.” What exactly is the paradox for these philosophers and how do they attempt to move beyond it and assert a **positive existential philosophy**.