

The Existentialist Philosophy

I. BACKGROUND

History :

1. Kantian Prussia victorious (1870 vs. France); optimistic, takes over Germany, Bismark Kulturkampf: idealism crush real life/people/things “might makes right”.
2. 1918 Germany crushed by defeat WWI. Optimism + glorification of reason, mental constructs creating the best possible world = out of fashion.
3. Return to more humble beginnings: human existence, raw individual, and day to day h. life. Is existentialism out of its egg-shell or still inmured into egg-sistence? Are we out of immanentist prison best defined by LeRoy: “An outside of the thought is unthinkable”.

Philosophy :

1. Descartes brings in the “cogito”: thought is first
2. Kant concludes: term of knowl is “ideas”, not things: Immanentism (thought=last)
3. Hegel: phil of pure ideas/essences, divorced from any real connection; optimistic
4. Swing of pendulum: no more optimism/organized thoughts: existentialism
5. In the 20th century intellectual journey:
 - a. modernist philo is agnostic, immanentist (vital immanence) & evolutionist, see Bergson, LeRoy & Blondel.
 - b. Existentialism, if distinct, falls into same pitfalls, focused on *vital* immanence.

II. EXISTENTIALIST MOVEMENT

- Wisdom (Sophia) = to reach the foundation of all existing realities. “What is being?” Socrates, St. Augustine, St. Thomas = existentialists (God = He who is)
- Here, another view of existence, from the phenomenological method of Husserl (Kant dichotomy of appearance/thing).
Away with the glorification of the intellect (rationalist/idealist), or of passion (romanticism); in with present sentiment, moment, authentic existence.
- Hazy halo of many self-described “existentialists”, as distinct as there are exist thinkers.
 - o Heidegger/Jaspers (Germ); Marcel, Sartre, Camus (France)
 - o Moralists (Wojtyla after Max Scheler);
 - o Personalists (Maritain after Mounier).
 - o Paternity goes to Kierkegaard: philo for him means resolving personal issues by a deliberate, real-life choice (anguish= main Ex sentiment)

- At first sight, down to earth and human movement:
 - a) much more “human” humanism than Hegel’s, a flesh and blood philosophy (+popular).
 - b) philosophy = biography, session with the psychiatrist, autopsy of the soul in all the tragicomedy of existence.
 - c) authors turned toward fiction or drama (Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre) rather than toward the treatise (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty).
 - d) original existence in all its unique and temporal reality, purely literary works, often along the lines of a private diary.
- Definition: *the descriptive philosophy of personal existence, entirely free in its destiny.*

III. THREE KEY PRINCIPLES

mentioned by Pascendi (Kant, Hegel, Bergson/Blondel)

1) **Vital Immanence**

- a. Husserl
 - i. back to Descartes’s enquiry: a search for the Northwest Passage, from inside of man to outside, from immanent to real (reflexive thought/projection of self).
 - ii. Same universal doubt, incl. Descartes’ fundamental *cogito*. Kantian mind think their thoughts “cogito cogitations”; to a German stomach, Kant offers mere thoughts of sausage and sauerkraut with no real sausage nor any real sauerkraut following behind—not even a little pint of beer to hoodwink his stomach.
 - iii. Husserl is left with conscious thought, but consciousness is consciousness *of something*. *Eureka!*
 - iv. Solution? Are dream dreamt true? Husserlian fairy tale, the shadow of a groom, armed with the shadow of a brush, stands forever grooming the shadow of a horse!
- b. Chorus of philosophers
 - i. Heidegger: “W/o *Dasein* [human being], no world is ‘there’. It is the experience we’ve all made of entering a dusty room and turning light on and, suddenly, sleepy things seem become alive and jump at us.
 - ii. Merleau-Ponty: “I am the absolute source. My existence does not come from my antecedents, it goes toward them and sustains them.”
- c. 1st Ex principle= ultimate voluntarism: *cogito-volo*—“I will, I think, it is!” Nothing can resist this will of iron, reality = clay in the potter’s hands. “I am the absolute source.” Man is henceforth a self-appointed absolute, building upon the ruins of the Absolute. For Sartre: Existence = liberty. “I must be free. I am because I will; I am my own beginning.”

2) Agnosticism

- a. Realism= things exist, have a nature, our intelligence can know it.
- b. Idealists deny that things have nature, and even if they had it, we would not know their nature because our knowing faculty is not informed by the thing but informs/deforms it.
- c. Ex does the same:
 - i. 2nd ex pple: *existence precedes essence*. Man 1^o) *is*; only 2^o) is *this*. Man creates his own essence and the entire universe with it. existence can still exist when deprived of its essence. Affirming such a thing is like saying the race runs, the flight flies the sightseeing sees. There is race running w/o a runner; flight w/o bird, sightseeing without a sightseer, and wine poured w/o glass. Socrates was chasing after the essences of things, burnt incense to reason. We need to dethrone reason and worship the absurd.
 - ii. Strong focus on liberty, meaning something irrational, we are past the milestone of ignorance and way into absurdity here! Ex. existence= no sweet dream; = dream turning nightmare. It is man condemned to liberty; in Sartre's play *The Flies*, Orestes retorts to Zeus: "You should not have made me free...No sooner had you created me than I ceased to be yours. I am doomed to have no other law but mine...For I, Zeus, am a man, and every man must find out his own way."
 - iii. It is man condemned to choose his destiny, fully aware that his destiny leads nowhere, hence the sentiment of *Nausea* for (Sartre)
 - iv. The conclusion of Sartre's philosophy in *Being and Nothingness*, = "there is nothing to understand bec everything in it is absurd". Is this *theory of the absurd* the last word of philo "love of wisdom"?

3) Evolution

- a. In Realism, to be > to become. There is stability based on God “Who is”, and on the unchanging essences.
- b. Ex did away with being, and adopts becoming as the ultimate:
 - i. Sartre: being is one with the event and the situation.
 - ii. Bergson, being is duration.
 - iii. Heidegger, being is time.
 - iv. For all, being, and with it the essence of all things, is pure becoming.
- c. 3pple: **the present moment is creative.**
 - i. W/o stable essences, beings have no identity: photo of individual age 5, 10, 20, 50. We do not say: “Peter is”, but you use an impersonal subject “it is becoming” as you say “it is raining/snowing”. No identical person emerges from the perpetual flux. Man is a situation, a present instant.
 - ii. Liberty has creative power. The entire world hangs on my absolute liberty. My free act has cosmic consequences.
 - iii. Each moment is at once creative and eschatological: man stands in the place of God the Father as depicted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, with a wave of the hand creating or annihilating a universe.
- d. Application: “Let us make God in our image”, relative, changing, absurd.
 - i. Rahner: the relativism of human nature leads straight to situation ethics, Christianity is a “not yet”, the religion of the future.
 - ii. Congar, human activity is the action of God;
 - iii. Chenu, the divine is the self-liberation of man;
 - iv. Laurentin, God is not yet.

4) BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

- a. Definition of Existentialism: *the descriptive philosophy of personal existence, entirely free in its destiny.*
- b. Ex pretended to free itself from being, facts and reason so as to be free from God. In this choice, Heidegger et al. founded the existentialist philosophy of absurdity and absolute license, ultimately the philosophy of nothingness.
- c. Despite its enticing aspects of authentic human life and freedom, it still conveys the 3 pitfalls of modernist philo: agnosticism, immanentism and evolution.
- d. No wonder why it was condemned by Pius XII in *Humani Generis* (1950).
 - i. “Such fictitious tenets of evolution which repudiate all that is absolute, firm and immutable, have paved the way for the new erroneous philosophy which, rivaling idealism, immanentism and pragmatism, has assumed the name of existentialism, since it concerns itself only with existence of individual things and neglects all consideration of their immutable essences.”
 - ii. “They allege that our perennial philosophy is only a philosophy of immutable essences, while the contemporary mind must look to the existence of things and to life, which is ever in flux...” among them, he targets existentialism.
- e. In next podcast, we’ll be going through the main architect of the “*new theology*”—translate neo-modernism—Henri de Lubac. Although his connection with the neo-modernist movement is nuanced, it is already revealing to see that he was akin to the spirit of the Ex philosophy
 - i. de Lubac’s & the obscure Blondel shared the same ideas, friends, enemies. They shared
 1. 1^o) the same doubt, lack of intellectual vigor, inferiority complex before modern man, infected with skepticism and subjectivism.
 2. They wished to reconcile a pseudo-philosophy with the faith,
 3. Same notion of truth as “correspondence of mind with life.”
 - ii. Card. Siri called his large body of work as “evasive” because it effectively denies of all the first principles of philosophy.
 - iii. Garrigou Lagrange: they have not abandoned Thomistic philosophy, because they have never known it: self-appointed teachers who have never been students.