

Our Time: Existentialism in the Age of Fear

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A colleague of mine recently told me that existentialism has been relatively inactive or irrelevant for so long that it can largely be considered a historical period. The point was that existentialism was “done” or “finished” in the same way that Kant’s or Plato’s philosophies are done: there is no more progress to be made, no more original work to be done, and so many counter-arguments have been made that it no longer can have any true influence on the contemporary age. However it seems to me that existentialism is one of the more resilient philosophies to ever have been proposed, renewing itself with fresh content as generations pass and carrying the message of human freedom, authenticity and choice into everyday life far more than any other philosophy. Indeed, existentialism is not simply an academic discipline: it is a view of human life and nature that applies to all in our daily routines, leaving us simultaneously with no true roadmap for life while placing the control entirely in our hands by providing the very framework to *make* the roadmap. Jean-Paul Sartre argued that writing should be “engaged” or “committed,” making reference to real issues and problems in an effort to change the world.¹ Philosophy should proceed in the same way: it should be committed to reshaping the world into a better place and helping individuals to ease through the struggles life presents. Existentialism, arguably the most committed philosophy ever proposed, attempts to do exactly that.

Some historical or cultural narrative that molds the minds and actions of its people invariably defines every generation. Historically, existentialist authors have seen

this narrative as something to overcome using the power of human freedom. For Fyodor Dostoevsky, it was the deficiencies of a classist, austere Russian societyⁱⁱ. Søren Kierkegaard responded to the orderliness of Hegelian philosophy and rebelled against the notion that faith should be “easy.”ⁱⁱⁱ Friederich Nietzsche played the antichrist to Kierkegaard’s work, encouraging people to overcome the strictures of religion that prevented them from enjoying human life and all its various pleasures since religions were an illusion in the first place: living ascetically toward some sort of afterlife was a waste of the only existence one would ever have.^{iv} Martin Heidegger^v and Sartre^{vi} took the same route; however they argued that one primarily needs to overcome the fear one has of death and live authentically, making the choices one actually desires instead of being governed by the will of “the they” (*Das Man*, meaning “others”).^{vii}

Sartre and Beauvoir^{viii} wrote in a time much like our own. After the horrors of two World Wars, the Holocaust, and the advent of the atom bomb, the western world lived in terror of nuclear annihilation at any time. Such was the worst possible scenario, with the least terrible scenario being a non-nuclear World War III between the democratic nations and the Soviet Union. As such, both philosophers focused their work on living one’s life in light of the inherent, constant possibility of one’s utter annihilation and providing some kind of justification for ethical behavior. Sartre understood that without a creator or predetermined essence of humanity and morality, the notion of “Good” was completely arbitrary, and so terrible atrocities and violations of peaceful existence were possible at any time.^{ix} While Sartre and Beauvoir both argued that we have a logical obligation to act in respect to the freedom of others as a logical extension of recognizing our own freedom, such an idea ignores the egoistic metaphysical priority we assign to our own self and its own freedom: we always experience our own self as a higher priority entity because it is *one’s own-most concern*.^x Such is not necessarily a morally

blameworthy concern. To a certain extent it is simply in our nature, a biological construct to ensure our own survival, and in a world where the good is an arbitrary, relative distinction, judging someone's strong concern for one's own interest is simply irrational: it presupposes a notion of the good as correct when that conception is exactly what must be proved.

In the present age, we have not truly departed from the age of fear. Rather, the fear individuals and collectives experience is more sinister, more personal, and more mathematically imbalanced. The defining moment of our generation, the governing paradigm under which we operate, is the terrorist attacks of 9/11, which demarcated a gestalt shift in the way we understand world politics, interfaith relations, and the impact of others in the global age. Instead of the peaceful acceptance and optimism that reigned supreme after the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, world politics and cognitive assessments of interactions were replaced by the ever-present fear of the next terror attack. The end of one's possibilities³ that Heidegger prophesied for each individual life became an ever-present possibility that was not only inevitable, but always more likely. Rather than death by natural causes, accidents, or some other crime, individuals needed to worry about the end of their lives coming in an explosion on the way to work or when attending a sporting event. The possibility is always there.

What demarcates this fear from others? In the first place, there is the paradox of solidarity: at the same time as we are united by the ever present fear that our possibilities may end by a terrorist attack, we are, at the same time, on an island by ourselves. Nuclear annihilation is certainly far more destructive in terms of the overall consequences, but in the age of terrorism there is the isolationist notion that the tragedy of the attack is always *mine*. If I am the victim, it is the result of bad luck, simply being in the wrong place, or poor judgment in failing to notice the telltale signs: a suspicious

package, someone trying to conceal something, etc. If I am the bystander, however, the tragedy is still, in a sense, my own: I now have to live in a world increasingly governed by fear and paranoia, a constant shadow that skews my judgment and makes feeling safe impossible. The result is that, in the positive sense, there is no collective solidarity: in death I am alone, and in survival I live in fear.

There is another aspect in which extremist violence seems inherently more unjust than any potential destruction during the Cold War, and this is a vague conception of innocence. In cases of radical extremism, the victims are rarely combatants or other public authority figures, although they certainly may be included as targets. Rather, many if not most of those involved in such attacks are, for all intents and purposes, innocent. They did nothing to the attackers in any positive way unless one wishes to claim that they played a passive role in the structure of capitalism or their country's deeds by the fact of their existence. This is true in natural law cases, in which morality is seen as an ultimate metaphysical reality, and in the nihilism that results if relativism is true. Even if there is no predetermined moral code, we still function under a notion of justice, and morality becomes a matter of whether one did something to deserve to have a "nice" thing or a "mean" thing done to them. In the case of the victims of extremism, most have done absolutely nothing to merit such an action. In the Cold War one can make the same argument, yet again we are confronted with the more personal nature of extremism and the notion that the old conflicts were about national forces in general, not individual, everyday people. The Cold War was also more about survival, whereas extremists try to remake the world according to their own wishes.

Westerners must also live in a world in which the illusion that we are loved by the rest of the world is completely shattered. This may not be as true for previous generations as it is for those born in the early nineties, for they had already experienced

the effects of the struggle between democracy and communism. For our generation, however, there was a pronounced gestalt shift in how we looked at the world. I, for instance, can clearly remember a time as a young child when I thought everyone in the world loved each other and nobody hated America because it was the land of peace and freedom. That illusion was shattered far too early for many children of the world: we grew up feeling that a large number of the world's citizens would gladly see us all dead, ruining our collective innocence.

There is, regrettably, a kind of solidarity in the negative sense as well, an exaggerated form of something that Derrida pointed to in our dealings with others: the masses and authorities in general seem to have a general mistrust of any person who looks like they are from the Middle East. Admittedly, organizations like Al Qaeda and ISIS are primarily run by Muslim extremists. However, it is a gross mistake to assume that every man, woman, and child of Middle Eastern descent or Muslim faith is a terrorist, and is indeed one of the great travesties of our time. At the same time, however, Derrida's work points out that we can never truly know if the other is a friend or a foe. Such is even encoded in the origins of the word "stranger."³⁸ We cannot, however, simply assume that the other is trying to hurt us, both because such is morally wrong, and because of sheer statistics: the immensely vast majority are not terrorists and follow the true, peaceful, tolerant tenets of Islam, and the terrorists come from an incredibly small, perverted distortion. Unfortunately, tragic events stick out in the mind far more than their absence, and so the result is an "us against them" mentality, a destructive solidarity of ignorance and hate that makes true peace impossible.

There is another type of fear that our generation must confront that is far less sinister than the fear of terrorist annihilation, but is certainly more personally gripping. We have been told growing up that the generation that fought World War II was the

greatest generation, a generation filled with heroic and brilliant (in both a good and a bad sense) individuals responsible for the most important conflicts, events, and social changes the world has ever known. The ensuing Cold War brought on an age of innovation as the arms race between the United States and Soviet Union grew, even forcing man to turn his eyes upward to space exploration. Our generation must live in the constant shadow of those great times, aspiring not even to top those achievements, but simply to live up to a proportionate level of success.

There is an old saying that the greatest desire a parent can have, aside from their child's happiness, is for their child to do better in life and be more successful than they were. The problem in our time is that this simply may not be possible for everyone anymore. There comes a point at which one's family can climb no higher on the ladder of success. The most obvious examples are billionaires, the financial masters of the world: where are their children to go? Or imagine being the son of a famous person: unless you do the same or better than your parent, anything you do will be a step down. The same applies to ordinary families as well, perhaps not in the sense of reaching one's zenith, but in terms of one generation simply not being able to climb higher: perhaps one's parents simply did so well that one may not be able to surpass them. Indeed, one of the greatest fears we face is not reaching our own potential due to circumstances we cannot control, or even worse, failing to reach the expectations others force on us. This may be because of their naturally endowed gifts, the financial situation they were born into, and the global economy, which has taken massive hits in the recent decades. Interest in banks is no longer at the staggeringly beneficial rate it was in the eighties, minimum wages have become stagnant, the job market is horrendous (especially for some of the more enjoyable careers that one might pursue), and there is no new frontier to expand into that would give new resources and opportunities to the

youth of the world. We are trapped in the limits of the Earth, struggling to make the most of the comparatively scant opportunities for drastic growth we are given.

This picture of hopelessness gets dramatically worse as one travels outside of the Western world to places where economic triumph has been impossible for centuries. If one is born in an impoverished country in Africa or southern Asia, one has little opportunity to improve one's circumstances because opportunities are far more scarce, and one must compete with far more immense numbers of people. Even if aid is given, more often than not it falls into the wrong hands or is taken by corrupt authority figures and never reaches those who need it most. For individuals in those situations, freedom is more of a distant ideal than a real possibility. Freedom has become a luxury for the rich individuals of the world who actually have the capacity to pursue it.

What is to be done about the horrible predicament in which man finds himself? We must remember that we are always free, no matter what our situation looks like. Sartre was a big proponent of taking full responsibility for one's choices. Even in situations in which one would die if one did not do something evil, Sartre insisted that the choice was still ours, that we must still take responsibility and control of our actions.^{iv} The same is true for both kinds of fear that grip our world. In the terror case, one must not be afraid to live one's life. Heidegger wrote that recognizing, accepting, and owning the end of one's possibilities as a certainty in life was a means of helping one give meaning to the time one has, thus helping one live authentically: one does what one actually wants to do, not what others think one should, *because* one recognizes the certainty of death.^v Putting off one's deepest desires because one will presumably always have more time results, more often than not, in dying before one has had the chance to do anything one wants to do at all. Sartre wrote similarly, describing the

notion of “bad faith” as denying the reality that one always has control and one is ultimately responsible for one’s choices and existence.^v

If we are to live authentically, then, we must not just be concerned about what others *want* us to do, but about what others try to *force* us to do. The most tragic consequence that extremism and violence can achieve is not physical destruction: if one is destroyed, one will no longer be capable of even processing that suffering. Rather, the greatest harm that evil can produce is the destruction of our freedom. If we yield to the possibility of demise, the impossibility of any true sense of lasting security, and the fear that the dark forces of the world wish to inflict on us, we lose any sense of what we are. Man is essentially free in that he has the power to decide his life for himself, the power to strive for meaning in what would otherwise be a meaningless existence. Yielding to the forces of violent conformism defies our own existence and makes a meaningful life impossible, and destroys any chance of using our lives to the fullest. We must be cautious, however, because extremists can use the notion of authenticity to their own ends. However, their desires run counter to the implicit sense of justice that we have already discussed, a code we all operate under in some way or another. If the extremist wishes to claim his actions are just, the burden of proof is on him, a burden it is impossible for him to satisfy, especially given the overwhelming condemnation of his way of life.

The same notion applies to the fear of not achieving one’s potential or failing to satisfy the expectations of others. The great existentialists were always concerned with overcoming what others wanted of us, either for good reasons or bad. As an exercise of own freedom, we must recognize the need to take the paths *we* hold significant, to become what *we* want to be, not what others wish for us. If we are the masters of our own fates and we are the force that gives our own lives meaning, then “failing” to reach

the goals others set for us is itself a meaningless concept: we can only fail if we fail ourselves, for the expectations of others are, themselves, meaningless unless we choose to give them any credence. The only way we fail is if we refuse to acknowledge and empower ourselves with our own freedom.

Thus we must strive constantly to overcome. We must overcome the expectations and life goals and meanings that others wish to encumber us with. We must strive to overcome the fear that we have of terrorists and extremists who wish to annihilate us. And we must strive to overcome the notion that we will not be good enough, that we will not live up to our potential or what we *should* accomplish. The only values that truly matter in this world are those we choose to adopt, and the only meaningfulness to be had is the meaning we give ourselves. We must, therefore, adopt a sense of existential courage: we must be courageous in the face of uncertainty, in the face of death, and the face others. Only by living courageously can we achieve a truly free and meaningful existence.

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* And Other Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 37.

² Fyodor, Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001).

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear And Trembling/The Sickness Unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁴ Friederich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Penguin Books, 1954).

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), and *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956).

⁷ Heidegger, 122-123.

⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1948).

⁹ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 28-29.

¹⁰ This idea stems from the ontological and phenomenological priority of Dasein (human existence, consciousness). While he makes no claim to normative ethics here, it is easy to make that leap in light of our own biological knowledge and phenomenological experiences. See Heidegger, 41-42.

¹¹ "The possibility of the impossibility of existenc [Existenz] in general. As possibility, death gives Dasein nothing to 'be actualized...'" Heidegger, 251.

¹² Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality," in *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 2000. 5.

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Freedom and Responsibility," in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Citadel Press, 1951).

^{xiv} Heidegger, 255.

^{xv} Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 87.