

Influential Intellectuals

Kerby Anderson examines four famous intellectuals—Rousseau, Marx, Russell and Sartre, looking for reasons they are worth following and not finding much.

Over the last two centuries, a few intellectuals have had a profound impact on Western Culture. British historian Paul Johnson writes about many of these influential intellectuals in his book, *Intellectuals: From Marx and Tolstoy to Sartre and Chomsky*. In this article, we will look at four of the better-known intellectuals whose influence continues to this day.



Paul Johnson reminds us that over the past two centuries, the influence of these secular intellectuals has grown steadily. He believes it is the key factor in shaping the modern world. In fact, this is really a new phenomenon. It was only the decline of clerical power in the eighteenth century that allowed these men to have a more significant influence in society.

Each secular intellectual “brought to this self-appointed task a far more radical approach than his clerical predecessors. He felt himself bound by no corpus of revealed religion.”^[1] For the first time, these intellectuals felt they alone could diagnose the ills of society and cure them without a need to refer to religion or past tradition.

One important characteristic of these new secular intellectuals was their desire to subject “religion and its protagonists to critical scrutiny.” And they pronounced harsh verdicts on priests and pastors about whether they could live up to their precepts.

After two centuries in which the influence of religion has declined and secular institutions have had a greater influence, Paul Johnson believes it is time to examine the

record and influence of these secular intellectuals. In particular, he focuses on their moral and judgmental credentials. Do they have the right to tell the rest of us how to run our lives? How moral and just were they in their financial dealings and their sexual relationships? And how have their proposed systems stood up to the test of time?

I will give you a preview. These secular intellectuals lived decadent lives and mistreated so many people in their lives. Their proposed systems of politics, economics, and culture have been a failure and devastated millions of lives.

What a contrast to the Christian message. Jesus lived a sinless life (1 John 3:5) even though He was tempted as we are (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus called on His disciples to follow Him (Matthew 4:19). Even the Apostle Paul encouraged Christians to follow his example as he followed the example of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Paul Johnson concludes his book with a number of examples of how some of these secular intellectuals addressed current political and social issues. He also points out that these intellectuals saw no incongruity in moving from their own discipline (where they are masters) to public affairs (where they have no expertise). In the end, we discover that they “are no wiser as mentors, or worthier as exemplars, than the witch doctors or priests of old.”[\[2\]](#)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a very influential intellectual. Many of our modern ideas of education were influenced to some degree by his treatise *Émile*. And even to this day many indirectly refer to some of his ideas found in the *Social Contract* that encapsulated his political philosophy.

Rousseau rejected the biblical narrative and instead believed

that society was the reason we humans are defective. He argued, "When society evolves from its primitive state of nature to urban sophistication, man is corrupted."[\[3\]](#)

Rousseau believed that you could improve human behavior (and even completely transform it) by changing the culture and the forces that produced it. In essence, he believed you can change human beings through social engineering.

He was, no doubt, a difficult person to be around and very egotistical. Paul Johnson explains that "part of Rousseau's vanity was that he believed himself incapable of base emotions."[\[4\]](#) He also had a great deal of self-pity for his circumstances and had "a feeling that he was quite unlike other men, both in his sufferings and his qualities."[\[5\]](#)

Paul Johnson also reminds us that Rousseau "quarreled, ferociously and usually permanently, with virtually everyone with whom he had close dealings, and especially those who befriended him; and it is impossible to study the painful and repetitive tale of these rows without reaching the conclusion that he was a mentally sick man."[\[6\]](#)

Apparently, he cared little for those around him. For example, his foster-mother rescued him from destitution at least four times. But later when he did much better financially, and she became indigent, he did little for her.[\[7\]](#) His five children born to his mistress were abandoned to the orphanage hospital. He did not even know the dates of their births and took no interest in them.

Rousseau even acknowledged "that brooding on his conduct towards his children led him eventually to formulate theory of education he put forward in *Émile*. It also clearly helped to shape his *Social Contract*, published the same year."[\[8\]](#)

The only woman who ever loved Rousseau summed him up this way:

“He was a pathetic figure, and I treated him with gentleness and kindness. He was an interesting madman.”[{9}](#)

In this article we are studying some of these secular intellectuals because they have had such a profound impact on our world even today. But as we can already see from the life of Rousseau and will see from some of the other men we will discuss below, they lived decadent lives. They really had no business telling the rest of us how to live our lives.

Karl Marx

Paul Johnson concludes that Marx “has had more impact on actual events, as well as on the minds of men and women, than any other intellectual in modern times.”[{10}](#)

Marx claimed that his philosophy was scientific. Paul Johnson disagrees and says it was not scientific. “He felt he had found a scientific explanation of human behavior in history akin to Darwin’s theology of evolution.”[{11}](#) Although Marx obtained a doctorate in philosophy he really wasn’t a scholar, at least in the traditional sense. He actually spent more time organizing the Communist League and collecting material.

Paul Johnson says there were three strands in Marx: the poet, the journalist, and the moralist. He used poetic imagery which actually became part of his political vision. He was also a journalist and fairly good one at that. He also made use of aphorisms. Many of the most famous were borrowed from others. Two of the best known are: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains,” and “Religion is the opium of the people.”

The moral impulse of Marx began with “his hatred of usury and moneylenders.”[{12}](#) He believed that Jews had corrupted Christianity. His solution, therefore, was to abolish the Jewish attitude toward money. Ultimately, the Jews and the corrupted version of Christianity would disappear. Later Marx

broadened his critique to blame the bourgeois class as a whole.

How did Marx treat others? “Marx quarreled with everyone with whom he associated” unless “he succeeded in dominating them completely.”[{13}](#) He also collected elaborate dossiers about his political rivals and enemies.”[{14}](#) Also, Marx “did not reject violence or even terrorism when it suited his tactics.”[{15}](#) Later Lenin, Stalin, and Mao would practice such violence on an enormous scale.

Central to his hatred of capitalism was probably his incompetence in handling money. He never seriously attempted to get and hold down a job. Instead, Engels became the primary source of income for Marx and his family. In fact, Engels nearly ended the relationship when he once received a letter from Marx that virtually ignored the death of a woman Engels loved and focused the rest of the letter asking for money.

Life for his wife Jenny and their children was a nightmare. In time her jewelry ended up at the pawnshop. “Their beds were sold to pay the butcher, milkman, chemist and baker.”[{16}](#) He even denied his daughters a satisfactory education. After his wife’s death, the family nursery-maid became his mistress and conceived a child whom Marx would never acknowledge. Once again, we see the decadent lives of these secular intellectuals.

Bertrand Russell

Paul Johnson says that “No intellectual in history offered advice to humanity over so long a period as Bertrand Russell.”[{17}](#) His first book was published when Queen Victoria was still alive, and his last book came out the year Richard Nixon resigned because of Watergate. He also wrote countless newspaper and magazine articles. He wrote so much because he found writing to be so easy, and he was well paid for it.

Russell was an orphan, but his parents (who were atheists) left instructions for him to be brought up on the teaching of John Stuart Mill. His grandmother, however, would have none of it and raised him in an atmosphere of Bibles and Blue Books, taught by governesses and tutors. Nevertheless, he rejected religion as a teenager and remained an unbeliever the rest of his life.

“No man ever had a stronger confidence in the power of intellect, though he tended to see it almost as an abstract, disembodied force.”[\[18\]](#) For much “of his life he spent in telling the public what they ought to think and do, and this intellectual evangelism completely dominated the second half of his long life.”[\[19\]](#) On a number of occasions, he found himself in trouble with the law, being sued and fined for articles he wrote.

Paul Johnson remarked that “No one was more detached from physical reality than Russell. He could not work the simplest mechanical device or perform any of the routine tasks which even the most pampered man does without thinking.”[\[20\]](#)

He said that the First World War caused him to revise the views he held about human behavior, in part because he could not understand how people’s emotions function in wartime. Reading him produced “a sense of wonder in the normal reader that so clever a man could be so blind to human nature.”[\[21\]](#)

Bertrand Russell believed “that the ills of the world could be largely solved by logic, reason, and moderation.” But here was his inconsistency. “When preaching his humanist idealism, Russell set truth above any other consideration. But in a corner, he was liable—indeed likely—to try to lie his way out of it.”[\[22\]](#)

As we have documented with other secular intellectuals, Russell also exploited women (especially his wives) as well as others who worked with him. This does seem to be a pattern.

When students are required to read the works of many these men, they are never told about their lives. Although we are supposed to respect their intellect, once we study their lives we find that there was very little to respect.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Paul Johnson concludes that “no philosopher this century has had so direct an impact on the minds and attitudes of so many human beings, especially young people, all over the world.”[\[23\]](#) Existentialism was a popular philosophy for decades. His plays were hits. His books sold in the millions.

He grew up as a spoiled child (his father dying when he was fifteen months), with his grandfather giving him the run of his library and his mother providing for him a childhood “paradise.” He enjoyed one of the best educations and had a habit of reading three hundred books a year.

In some ways, World War II made Sartre, though the people around him found little use for him. He “was notorious for never taking a bath and being disgustingly dirty. What he did was write.”[\[24\]](#) He didn’t do anything to save the Jews. Instead, he “concentrated relentlessly on promoting his own career. He wrote furiously, plays, philosophy and novels, mainly in cafés.”[\[25\]](#)

Sartre is known for the philosophy of existentialism, though the word was not his. The press invented it, and he came to embrace it. He proposed his philosophy of human freedom at a time when people were hungry for it. But he also meant that the existentialist individual must live without excuses. That is the why he wrote that “Man is condemned to be free.”

Sartre’s companion through life was Simone de Beauvoir, who was a brilliant writer and philosopher. But he treated her “as a mistress, surrogate wife, cook and manager, female bodyguard, and nurse.”[\[26\]](#) He was “the archetype of what in

the 1960s became known as a male chauvinist.”[\[27\]](#) He had numerous sexual liaisons that came and went with some regularity.

Paul Johnson concludes that “Sartre, like Russell, failed to achieve any kind of coherence and consistency in his views on public policy. No body of doctrine survived him.”[\[28\]](#) Apparently he stood for very little other than to be linked to the liberal Left.

In this article we have taken a brief look at the lives of some of the secular intellectuals who have had an influence in the world. They still have some influence, and so it is worth asking if we should accept their prescriptions.

These men all lived decadent lives. Most of them mistreated people in their lives. But even more disturbing is the fact that they proposed systems of politics, economics, and culture that have been a failure and devastated millions of lives. They do not deserve the prominence they are often given in our universities today. We are expected to revere them, but there is little in their lives to respect.

Notes

1. Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals: From Marx and Tolstoy to Sartre and Chomsky* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1988), 1.
2. Ibid., 34.
3. Ibid., 3.
4. Ibid., 10.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 14.
7. Ibid., 19.
8. Ibid., 23.
9. Ibid., 27.
10. Ibid., 52.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 57.

13. Ibid., 70.
14. Ibid., 71.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 77.
17. Ibid., 197.
18. Ibid., 199.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 202.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 203.
23. Ibid., 225.
24. Ibid., 229.
25. Ibid., 230.
26. Ibid., 235.
27. Ibid., 236.
28. Ibid., 253.

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Talking About the Problem of Evil

T.S. Weaver has put together an intellectual response to the problem of evil that includes a theology of evil and suffering, and a philosophical/theological series of proper defenses of God and His righteousness considering evil.

What is Evil?



The problem of evil is famous. This problem is personal because my wife stayed stuck as an agnostic for a long time. An agnostic, by the way, is a person who says they don't know if there is a God. Like so many people, she thought that if you believe in a God who is all good and all-powerful, then the presence of evil and suffering creates a problem.

Atheist philosopher David Hume said, "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able to but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"

Let's address this. I'll give you a roadmap of where we're going. First, we need to address how one can even object to evil. Second, I will talk about what evil is and is not. Then I will talk about some possible reasons God allows evil. Finally, I'll close with God's solution.

To start, if this challenge were raised by an atheist, we need to address the moral argument. If there is right and wrong, then they are grounded in the existence of a good and moral God. Because without an absolute Moral Law, which requires an absolute Moral Law Giver, the atheist has no grounds for a complaint against evil.

Former atheist C.S. Lewis summarizes how this thinking eventually guided him to Christianity: "My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?"

Evil is not a "thing" that exists; and God is not the cause. Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas point out that evil is not a real entity in the world. This means evil is not a material or

a phenomenon that exists by itself. It's like darkness, which is not a created thing; it's the absence of light. Evil describes a deficiency or denial of good. Philosophers call this deficiency a privation. Evil is what occurs once the good is altered or distorted. In Genesis 1 and 2, God told us all that existed was good. Evil was not an innovation, but a distortion. So, God is not the creator or author of evil.

The Best-of-All-Possible-Worlds

Let us consider the best-of-all-possible-worlds argument. The place to start is God's omniscience. This allows God to understand all possibilities. If God knows all possibilities, God knows all possible worlds. Since God is also completely good, He always wants and works out the best world and the best way.

Leibniz (the philosopher who came up with this defense) wrote, "The first principle of existences is the following proposition: God wants to choose the most perfect."

The power of this argument is to show that out of every world that a good God could have produced, His decision to generate *this* one means this creation is good.

There are several principles that tie into this defense.

The first major principle is centered on the truth that God acts for worthy causes. Again, God's omniscience presumes that before God decides which world to produce, He understands the value of every possible world. This also implies God always decides on the base of sensible, stable rationales. This is called the "principle of sufficient reason."

To believe God can intercede in what he has formed with sufficient reason, even to avoid or restrict evil, would be like a soldier who abandons his post and knowingly allows enemy infiltration to instead stop a colleague from drinking

while in uniform. The soldier ends up allowing a greater evil in order to stop a lesser evil.

Another principle that reinforces this argument is the principle of “pre-established harmony.”

Leibniz describes it this way: “For, if we were capable of understanding the universal harmony, we should see that what we are tempted to find fault with is connected to the plan most worthy of being chosen; in a word we should see, and should not believe only, that what God has done is the best.”

Human Free Will

Above, we covered the principle of sufficient reason as part of the best-of-all possible worlds. The last principle of the best-of-all-possible-worlds is human free will. For Leibniz, this idea was just a principle in part of his greater defense. For Augustine, C.S. Lewis, and Alvin Plantinga it was an entire defense by itself. In its simplest form, it goes something like this: God set us up not to be machines but free agents with the power to choose.

If God were to make us capable of freely choosing the good, He had to create us also able to freely choose evil. Consequently, our free will can be misused and that is the explanation for evil.

Jean-Paul Sartre communicates this wonderfully: “The man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved. . . . If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone.” God knows that a better world is created, if human beings are infused with free will, even if they decide to behave corruptly.

Were God to force us to make good choices, we would not be making choices at all, but simply implementing God’s instructions like when a computer runs a program.

For humans to have the capability to be ethically good, free will is necessary. Morality hangs on our capability to freely choose the good.

Plantinga asserts, "God creates a world containing evil, and he has a good reason for doing so." John Stackhouse Jr. says, "God, to put it bluntly, calculates the cost-benefit ratio and deems the cost of evil to be worth the benefit of loving and enjoying the love of these human beings."

Stackhouse sums up Plantinga's argument like this:

"God desired to love and be loved by other beings. God created human beings with this in view. To make us capable of such fellowship, God had to give us the freedom to choose, because love, though it does have its elements of 'compulsion,' is meaningful only when it is neither automatic nor coerced. This sort of free will, however, entailed the danger that it would be used not to enjoy God's love and to love God in return, but to go one's own way in defiance of both God and one's own best interest."

God created us with free will because our decision to say "yes" to Him is only a real choice if we are also free to say "no" to Him.

The Greater Good

To review, so far, we've addressed how one can even object to evil, in the moral argument. We've talked about what evil is and is not, and the idea of it being a privation. We've talked about some possible reasons God allows evil, which included the best-of-all-possible-worlds argument and the free will defense. Now I want to go over the greater good principle. While all the arguments I've given so far are intellectual and do not necessarily help with the emotional side of evil and suffering, this principle is especially delicate. I say "delicate" because this defense may not help a questioner much

if they have been a victim of a seemingly very unwarranted evil, and/or if they are still carrying anger or bitterness.

Again, the topic we are examining is the greater good principle, which argues that certain evils are needed in the world for certain greater goods to happen. To put it another way, certain evils in this world are called for, as greater goods stem after them. For instance, nobody would believe a doctor who cuts out a cancerous tumor is being evil because he made an incision on the patient. The surgery incision is much less evil than letting the tumor develop. The greater good is the patient being cancer-free. Parents who penalize children for poor conduct with the loss of toys or privileges or even giving spankings are instigating pain (particularly from the kid's viewpoint). Although, without this discipline, the other possibility is that the kid will develop into a grownup with no discipline and would consequently face much more suffering. We do not understand in this world all the good God is preparing; therefore, we need to trust that God is good even when we can't see it and we can't understand the larger picture of what He's doing.

Plus, nearly all individuals will award some truth to the saying ascribed to Nietzsche: "Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger." Consequently, the principle of allowing pain in the short term to bring about a greater contentment eventually is legitimate and one we know and use ourselves. That implies there is no mandatory contradiction between God and the reality of evil and suffering.

The Cross

Finally, I end with the cross and the hope of Christianity. Jesus agonized in enduring the nastiest evil that can be thrown at him: denial by His own adored people; abhorrence from the authorities in His own religion; unfairness at the hands of the Roman court; unfaithfulness and disloyalty from

His closest friends; the public disgrace of being stripped nude and mocked as outrageous “King of the Jews”; anguish in the agony of crucifixion; and the continuous weight of the lure to despair altogether, to crash these unappreciative beings with shocks of heaven, to recommence with a new race, to assert Himself. Instead, Jesus remained there, embracing into Himself the sins of the world, keeping Himself in position as His foes wreaked their most terrible treatment.

Our faith in a good God is sensible, because Jesus suffered on our behalf, and took the punishment we deserve. *He* understands what it is to suffer. *He* has lived there.

The cross was a world-altering occasion where the love and compassion of God dealt efficiently with the immensity of human sin. His death and resurrection show evil is trounced, and death has been slain. Contemplate the many implications of the atonement: Jesus is the Victor, He has paid our ransom, God’s wrath has been satisfied, and Jesus is the substitution for the offenses we have perpetrated.

As if that is not enough, the Christian narrative ends with faith in the future where complete justice will be done, and all evils will be made right. When Christ returns, He will not once more give in to mortal agencies and quietly accept evil. He will come back to deliver justice. The Bible’s definitive solution to the problem of evil is that evil will be dealt with. God will create a new heaven and a new earth for persons God has loved so long and so well. This is the core of our faith in the middle of pain and suffering.

In conclusion, what I’ve just presented to you, and what my wife eventually figured out, is that evil is not a thing created by God. A valid complaint against evil cannot be made without the existence of God. God has plausible reasons for allowing evil. And He clearly has a plan to defeat it. All He wants you to do is trust Him.

Ethics: Pick or Choose?

Written by Ray Cotton

How to Choose Right From Wrong

After four years at Harvard University as an undergraduate, one student proclaimed in his graduation oration that there was one central idea, one sentiment which they all acquired in their Harvard careers; and that is, in one word, confusion.

That same year, Harvard's graduate-student orator said, "They tell us that it is heresy to suggest the superiority of some value, fantasy to believe in moral argument, slavery to submit to a judgment sounder than your own. The freedom of our day is the freedom to devote ourselves to any values we please, on the mere condition that we do not believe them to be true."[\[1\]](#)

Our universities are teaching students that there are no solid guidelines to life. Since everything is relative, they are totally free to create anything they want out of their lives. Students are told that no one has a right to tell them how they ought to live. Decisions about right and wrong are strictly up to them. It makes no difference what they choose to make of their lives. Students are not encouraged to ask the traditional questions about the usefulness of life or the value of an exemplary life. As the above graduate student pointed out, they don't even want you to take your own conclusions about life seriously. It is a philosophy of ambiguity. It is the philosophy of humanistic existentialism. Many today are striving to break away from traditional values and embrace a sense of futility. Today we see it in the lives

of teenagers who have “tried everything” and found life to be wanting. We see it in the life style of the “survivalists” who have given up hope in God and the future, holing up in defense of a coming catastrophe.{2}

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the fathers of humanistic existentialism, the world is absurd, lacking any concept of ultimate justification. Sartre declares we have no ultimate purpose or plan to our lives. We are nothing and are therefore free to make ourselves into anything we want to be.{3} It doesn't even matter if you believe in your own proclamations because there is no more reason for you to exist than for you to not exist. Both are the same. The existentialist says you can just pick and choose your values. It makes no difference. There is no transcendent truth or power beyond man himself. Sartre doesn't believe in any God, nor does he believe that there is any preconceived design. There is no principle of authority to determine action. He says one must invent an original solution for each situation.{4} Therefore, in the sovereignty of his freedom, man creates his own values. Morality is rooted in human choice. Man alone gives his life its importance. Mankind must somehow transcend a life of absurdity and despair.

Is this humanly created reality true or are those who believe it trying to live in a dream world? Is the existentialist trying desperately to deflect the true absurdity and despair of his position? Is this the view of life that we expect our college students to be learning?

The Foundation of Existentialism

Prior to World Wars I & II, modern man believed that through science and human engineering an ever better world was evolving. They believed that mankind was getting better, that peace and prosperity would reign. They were convinced that we had finally figured out how to live together in harmony and to build a better world.

Then came the rude awakening of two world wars and the hideous crimes against human beings perpetuated by Hitler's Third Reich. Out of the continuing frustration and destruction of World War II came a new philosophy of life. It was a philosophy conceived by those who had lost hope, who could only see the chaos. They lost their hope in any ultimate meaning for life. They were unable to see beyond the carnage of war-torn Europe. Their view of life was called humanistic existentialism.

Men like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus sought to establish a new view of life, a "new humanism" with a whole new set of values. Prior to these men, the need for a transcendent force, a higher authority beyond man himself, helped set limits and gave guidance to our lives. An example of this transcendence would be the Ten Commandments, given to man by God. These new philosophers defined transcendence in an entirely different way. They saw transcendence only in their own aims and goals. For the existentialists, transcendence was a way to escape what they saw as the meaninglessness of life by establishing aims and goals to make whatever they wanted out of themselves, to create their own reality. For them there were no norms or standards, other than what they might choose to agree upon among themselves.

You have to realize that for these existentialist thinkers, all human activities were equivalent in value. Human activity amounted to the same thing "whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations."[\[5\]](#) However, without God, there can be no transcendent view of human nature because there is no God to have a conception of it.[\[6\]](#) Man is merely an evolved animal. Today we see many young people caught up in this attitude of cynicism and despair. They just don't care anymore. Life has become jaded. Many young people pass their time in a fantasy world of drugs, music and sex.[\[7\]](#)

Man's nothingness forms the foundation of existential thinking. Man is an empty bubble floating on a sea of

nothingness.[{8}](#)

Trying to build an ethic for life based on the philosophy of existentialism is quite a challenge. Not only do the existentialists have to create a set of values to live by, but first of all, they have to create optimism out of a view of absurdity and despair. It is called an ethic of ambiguity because each person has no one to answer to but himself. There is no one else to blame, each individual is without excuse. Life is merely a game to be won or lost, to seek to become one's own hero.

The existentialist wills himself to be free and in so doing wills himself to be moral.[{9}](#)

Existentialism Collides with a Biblical Worldview

We live in a world that has been characterized as "plastic", without value and sterile. Many have forgotten what it means to live, to be fully human. Hours are spent in front of the TV, in a world of fantasy and escapism. Many people are becoming devoid of human warmth and significant human interaction.[{10}](#)

In this essay I have examined the ethics of humanistic existentialism. To fully understand ethics one must have considerable clarity about what it is to be human.[{11}](#) Is man an evolved animal required to create his own essence, as the existentialist would say? Though there is freedom to choose our own actions, there is no significance in our actions. Choices are made in the face of meaninglessness. The values of existentialism are anchored in the world of ordinary experiences. Their values come from what is. And for the existentialist what is, is man's absurd condition.[{12}](#)

How does existentialism compare to a God-centered, theistic view of ethics? For the Christian, ethical values are revealed

to man by God. Perfect freedom lies only in service to God.{13} The existentialist defines God as “self-caused” and then says there is no God because it is impossible to be self-caused. The Christian says that God is “uncaused”, not self-caused. If you want absolute freedom, it is all too easy to deem God nonexistent. Even Sartre admits that “since we ignore the commandments of God [concerning] all value prescribed as eternal, nothing remains but what is strictly voluntary.”{14} Throwing off all limitations and declaring his atheism, Sartre explains the process in his autobiography:

I had been playing with matches and burned a small rug. I was in the process of covering up my crime when suddenly God saw me. I felt His gaze inside my head and on my hands...I flew into a rage against so crude an indiscretion, I blasphemed...He never looked at me again...I had the more difficulty getting rid of Him [the Holy Ghost] in that He had installed Himself at the back of my head...I collared the Holy Ghost in the cellar and threw Him out.{15}

Aldous Huxley, another famous existentialist, said:

For myself, no doubt for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was ... from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom.{16}

The truth of Huxley's words ring out loud and clear. All around us we find individuals rejecting the truth of God's word and embracing false doctrines that allow them to vent their passions and immorality. Satan loves to get us discouraged and despairing, then he shows us a false way out that caters to our old fleshly nature, a way that allows us to do as we please.

The Bible says that we are in bondage either to sin or to God. We will serve one or the other. Our only choice is to decide

who or what we will serve, the God of the Spirit, or the god of the flesh. The choice is ours.

Rejecting Biblical Truth Ultimately Leads to Despair

How did modern philosophy arrive at such a seemingly absurd state? In the late nineteenth century certain scholars assaulted the Bible and Christian beliefs. This “higher criticism” was promoted by men dedicated to the destruction of orthodox Christianity. In their minds the Bible was no more than a novel, a book of fiction with some good moral lessons. This movement was the spiritual legacy of the Enlightenment which put the claims of religion outside the realm of reason. Natural law, based on human reason alone, was slowly substituted for biblical law. Christian faith was separated from historic reality. The focus of all studies was shifting from God to man.

The real motive of higher criticism of the Bible was purely ethical. Men and women don't like the idea of having to be obedient to God. Therefore, they denied the historic validity of the Bible. This denial was based on an evolutionary model of human morality and human history. They sought to separate ethics from faith^[17] in order to free themselves from God's final judgment.

Kierkegaard, a 19th century philosopher, is considered the father of existentialism. He took this idea of the separation of faith and reason and said that we could not know God rationally. Therefore, he tried to reach God by what he called an irrational leap of faith. Since it was not rational to believe in God, but it was necessary, you must believe irrationally. Sartre and Camus simply took the next step when they said belief in God was not only irrational, but unnecessary.

Therefore, modern man started the path to a meaningless life

when he questioned whether man could know God. Indeed, when man questioned even God's ability to communicate with man, this led the existentialist to ask, "If God is dead, isn't man dead also?" This existential death of man has led to apathy, absurdity and ambiguity. The philosopher Bertrand Russell said it best when he said:

What else is there to make life tolerable? We stand on the shore of an ocean, crying to the night and to emptiness. Sometimes a voice of one drowning, and in a moment the silence returns. The world seems to me quite dreadful, the unhappiness of many people is very great, and I often wonder how they all endure it. It is usually the central thing around which their lives are built, and I suppose if they did not live most of their lives in the things of the moment, they would not be able to go on.

Rejection of God's grace creates a world of hopeless despair. Existentialism leaves man without hope. In contrast, the Christian has the hope of eternal life based on faith in a living, personal God whom we can personally experience with all our mind, body and spirit.

Can Human Beings Live the Existential Life?

How many of your acquaintances are demonstrating by their lives that they believe there are significant ethical implications in the decisions they make and the activities they are involved in? Do you know people who live life caught up in self-preoccupation, doing only that which gives immediate pleasure? Are they filling their lives with movies, TV, sports and other preoccupations which shield them from dealing with the ethical reality of their lifestyle?

In this essay I have been discussing the ethics of humanistic existentialism, an ethic of freedom in ambiguity. It is an ethic that says man is nothing except what he or she decides

to create of themselves and whatever choice they make really doesn't matter.

It sounds absurd, and it is, but sadly it is the ethic often being taught on the college campuses. One philosophy professor at a major university in Texas proudly informs his classes that he is an atheist and that his goal is to show the class that they can develop a system of ethics without a belief in a god. Of course he is right. One can design a set of relativistic ethical standards, but it is an ethic built on sand. An ethic of ambiguity will never give the support these students need in the hard world of reality. Did Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the leading writers in existentialist theory, hold to their position till the end? There is evidence that they did not. From a dialogue recorded in 1980 when nearing his death, Sartre came very close to belief in God, perhaps even more than very close. He made a statement that may show his acceptance of the grace of God. He said,

I do not feel that I am the product of chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone who was expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being whom only a Creator could put here; and this idea of a creating hand refers to God.

In this one sentence Sartre seems to disavow his entire system of belief, his whole life of dedication to existentialism. If this is true, it is a condemnation of humanistic existentialism by Sartre himself.[{18}](#)

What about Albert Camus? According to Rev. John Warwick Montgomery, an internationally respected Lutheran minister and author, there was a retired pastor of the American Church in Paris who told him that Albert Camus was to have been baptized within the month of his tragic death and that Camus had seen the bankruptcy of humanistic existentialism.[{19}](#)

All this is second hand information, but it does cast a shadow

upon the ethics of existential humanism. Either we live a life of hope or of despair. Regardless of the claims made, existential humanism does not leave room for hope. Simone de Beauvoir, the mistress of Sartre and also an existentialist writer, came the closest of any of these writers to the real truth when she said it was reasonable to sacrifice one innocent man that others may live.[\[20\]](#) This is the foundation of the whole gospel message of Christianity: Jesus Christ, the innocent Son of God, died that all men might be saved. Meanwhile the existentialist stands alone with hope only in one's self. He is alone in a world without Christ, instead of being secure in the knowledge of Christ's love and redemption. Praise God that He is there and He is not silent!

Notes

1. Robert N. Bellah, et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1991), 43, 44.
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3. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism and Ethics." *Moral Education*. Barry I. Chazan and Jonasa F. Soltis, Eds. (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1973, reprinted from *Existentialism*, New York: The Philosophical Library, 1947), 11-61.
4. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991), 142.
5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square, 1965), 627.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, Trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948), 28.
7. Evans, 72.
8. Norman L. Geisler, *Is Man the Measure? An Evaluation of Contemporary Humanism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 40-41.
9. De Beauvoir, 24-25.

10. Evans, 74.
11. Linda A. Bell, *Sartre's Ethics of Authenticity* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), 28.
12. Otto Bollnow, "Existentialism's Basic Ethical Position," *Contemporary European Ethics*, Joseph J. Kockelmans, Ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972), 332.
13. Philip Thody, *Sartre: A Biographical Introduction* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 72.
14. Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, 23-24.
15. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words* (New York: George Braziller, 1964), 102, 252-253.
16. Quoted by Stanley L. Jaki, *Cosmos and Creator* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1980), 116.
17. Gary North, *The Hoax of Higher Criticism* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), 9-48.
18. Geisler, 46-47.
19. John Warwick Montgomery, "Letter from England," "On the Reliability of the Four Gospels," *New Oxford Review* (May 1994), 22-24.
20. De Beauvoir, 150.

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