

Existential Crisis

It has been found, I am told, that existential philosophy has exerted an unfortunate influence on student behavior, and I have been asked to offer some brief elucidation of the matter.

First, then, an existential philosophy is not some abstract account of the universe, some materialism, idealism, rationalism.

It is concerned with the concrete business of human living,

~~not indeed with human living as sensitive, intel~~

not indeed with human living as physical, chemical, biological

process, but with its sensitive, intellectual, rational, volitional,

emotional

components. It is concerned, then, with man not only as alive but

also as awake. It ~~is~~ does not aim at some recondite, scientific

account of man's waking state. Rather it dwells upon the

phenomena of everyday existence and experience. It does not

stop short with phenomenological description but goes right

on to value judgements. It will contrast ^{, for example,} unauthentic with

authentic human existence. The unauthentic man is the drifter

that thinks, says, does what everyone else is thinking, saying,

and doing, and the others too are doing just that. ~~Humanity~~

On the other hand, authentic existence begins when one finds

out for oneself that one has to decide for oneself just what

one intends to make of oneself. Such authentic existence is

precarious; it lasts just as long as one faces up to that

challenge, but it lasts no longer.

To attain authentic human existence calls for illumination and motivation. It calls for illumination; one has to have

reached some understanding of man, of human living, of one's

social, cultural, historical situation, of the real possibilities,

opportunities, necessities presented to one in that situation.

It calls for motivation: to be authentically human is not just knowing; one has to deliberate, evaluate, decide, commit oneself; without motivation there is no commitment; and without commitment one just drifts.

By authentic human existence, then, is meant the goal that is referred to when we speak of people growing up, finding themselves, ~~and~~ settling down, maturing. It is a goal to be attained by the individual in his own self-discovery, his self-determination, his own shaping of his life. But however personal and intimate, it does not occur in isolation. It also is a response to other persons, a response moulded by a home, a response filled out by the schools that enable ^{him} ~~one~~ to inherit his social and cultural tradition, a response deepened by religious example, instruction, experience. It is a response achieved when he loves, when he is pulled, transported, beyond himself, by the intimate love of the family circle, by the civic love dedicated to group welfare and to the welfare of mankind, by the love of God to which St Paul referred when he spoke of God's love flooding our hearts through the Spirit of God being given to us (Rom 5, 5).

So much for authentic human existence. But my title is existential crisis ~~and then~~, and this, I think, arises in two manners. ~~It is~~ There is the crisis that arises from a conflict between the individual's need to exist authentically and the objective situation in which he finds himself. Then the situation is found so absurd that the project of being authentically human seems hopeless; then there is much to encourage hatred, loathing, defiance, and little to awaken love.

When such a crisis is common experience, as in Germany in the catastrophic aftermath of the first world war, in France during the occupation, in Italy after the second world war, existential philosophies emerge and flourish. They overflow the banks of academic philosophy, excite widespread interest, collect devoted followers, penetrate literature and the arts, are discussed in cafés, and give rise to new schools of psychiatry.

But there is another type of existential crisis. Canada and the United States have not been starved by a blockade; their cities have not been bombed; their territory has not been occupied by hostile troops. There there ~~is~~ occurs existential crisis, but it is confined to youth, and it creates a generation gap. To a greater or less extent youth suspects the authenticity of their elders, refuses to ~~accept~~ accept their way of life, is determined to reshape things in some quite different, if unspecified, manner. Why they should do so, is a very large and difficult question. ~~Answers may stress the grave evils~~

~~in our society. But they may also point to the fact that a failure in the educational system -- excessive permissiveness in the home, excessive experimentation in the school, excessive demythologization in the pulpit, and excessive attention to the profitably mass media providing us with information and entertainment -- that a failure in the educational system now is the~~

and difficult question. To a great extent one's view will

depend on one's estimate of youthful attitudes and behavior.

In so far as one finds them ~~if one considers them to be~~ manifestations of broad experience,

~~penetrating intelligence, ~~balanced~~ well-informed and ~~is~~ balanced~~

judgement, and maturely conscious responsibility, then one ~~is~~

look for ~~to find~~ the root trouble in the grave evils that afflict our

society as a whole. On the other hand, ^{in so far as one finds} ~~if one considers~~ current youthful attitudes and behavior ~~as~~ manifesting a lack of experience, a rather superficial exercise of intelligence, hasty and poorly informed judgement, and no little measure of ~~the~~ irresponsibility, ^{place} then one will be inclined to ~~place~~ the problem, less in our society as a whole, and more in its educational procedures. In the former case, one will blame the morals of ~~the~~ older people, the way our political institutions work, the tendencies of our economic organization, ^{our wars, our poverty, our slums.} In the latter case, one will be asking whether there has been too much permissiveness in the home, too much experimentation in the school, too much demythologizing in the pulpit, too much of the mass media supplying information and entertainment in the style and manner best calculated to ^{reap} a nice big profit.

But whatever its origins, existential crisis consists in a conflict between one's need to live one's own life and, on the other hand, the objective situation in which it is lived. Where that conflict occurs, there there is a market for existential philosophy. The effect of the philosophy will be to objectify the crisis, to clarify its contours, to work out its implications, to indicate lines of resolution. But different existential philosophies will do so in quite different manners. Kierkegaard was a deeply concerned Christian, and Nietzsche was a militant atheist. Gabriel Marcel is an ardent Catholic, Karl Jaspers though not a Christian is deeply concerned with religious values, Martin Heidegger is an agnostic with a Stoic twist, Jean-Paul Sartre is ~~a dialectician~~ and a dialectician propagating atheistic immorality, pronouncing the human condition to be inevitably absurd, and contending that love takes the form either of sadism or of masochism.

a successful writer, a brilliant phenomenologist, and an outrageously destructive dialectician.

Of these it would be Sartre that would exert a sinister influence, and he would do so both on a popular level by his literary studies, his novels, and his plays and, as ~~novels and plays and~~, as well, on a theoretical level by his philosophy. He affirms human freedom. He insists that man must be committed. He himself played a noble role in the French ~~Resistance~~ underground resistance to the Nazis. But he finds the universe absurd. For him nature is de trop, pointless, nauseating. Other people are Hell: l'enfer c'est l'autre. God does not exist: indeed the concept of God is pronounced a contradiction in terms. The very structure of man's being destines ~~it~~ man to failure: the pour soi wants to be en soi, and that just cannot occur. So ~~he~~ Sartre depicts loving ending up as masochism, sexual desire as sadism, ~~self-expression~~ ~~and~~ ~~self-expression~~ self-expression in the wanton gestures and deeds of the anti-hero.

~~Now the practical question, put to me, and it took the form, What can a counsellor do? Can it be that there is very little that a counsellor can do?~~

Now a practical question was put to me, and it took the form, What can a counsellor do when a student has come under existentialist influence and is considering the use of drugs? Can it be that there is very little that a counsellor can do?

First, then, the problem is of the type envisaged by logotherapy. The apprehension of meaning and ^{the} response to values are constitutive of human living. Things can go wrong on the higher humanistic and philosophic levels of apprehension and ~~the~~ response.

Secondly, even if the counsellor were an excellent philosopher, I think it doubtful that much would be accomplished by pointing^{out} the basic errors in Sartre's system. For these errors lie in cognitional theory; cognitional theory is so difficult and disputed ~~↓~~ because it is infested with cognitional myth; , until it is broken~~↓~~, and nothing appears more obvious, evident, certain, indubitable than a myth.

Thirdly, if the student is capable of philosophic reading, the counsellor could recommend a broader approach to the issues. Directly on Sartre there is an excellent Harper Torchbook by Wilfred Desan entitled Tragic Finale. On the main existentialists there are two further Harper Torchbooks, F. H. Heinemann's Existentialism and the Modern Predicament and H. J. Blackham's Six Existentialist Thinkers. There also is ~~↓~~ James Collins' book, The Existentialists, published by Regnery, Chicago, 1952. In all of these there are further bibliographies.

Fourthly, if existentialist influence has been ~~not~~ mainly literary, ~~the counsellor might seek the advice of professors of literature for remedial reading appropriate to~~ mainly literary, the counsellor ~~might~~ would have the ^{of student} problem of drawing up profiles of the different types [^] he has been trying to help and then seeking to interest professors of literature in the task of finding and recommending remedial reading.

Fifthly, the influence of sinister existentialist writing is not the whole trouble. [^] It is only a contributing factor. Behind existentialist writing there is the existentialist crisis, and for this reason young people do not have to read ~~the~~ European philosophers before being tempted to take drugs.

The function, then, of the remedial reading is to remove an extraneous factor that has been blocking the efforts of the counsellor. But once that barrier is removed, the counsellor will have to call upon his own special training and skills to bring to light the underlying existential crisis.

Sixthly, the problems of existential crisis cannot be solved by counsellors alone. I suggested above that they arise either from the ills of our society, or from the defects of our educational process or, more probably, from both. These issues are very large and complex, and this is not the occasion to ventilate them. But I should like to affirm in closing not merely that academic vice-presidents and deans and professors should be very concerned with them and with possible remedies but also that student unrest, student disenchantment with the whole system, ~~that~~ forces the matter on their attention.