EXISTENTIALISM – A PRACTICAL APPROACH FOR A MODERN WORLD?

Daniel Kalderimis

Introduction

Have you ever picked up a self-help book from a bookstore and, although perhaps agreeing with its advice to take responsibility for your life and to treat other people kindly, wondered a little as to where the author's moral certaint as to how to approach the world comes from?

If so, you are probably not alone. In our fast-paced and increasingly secular age, our decisions are frequently based on an implicit and unarticulated moral framework; a sort of commonsense guide to behaviour.

To some, this is simply the consequence of believing neither in a supreme God nor in natural laws which, of necessity, bind the whole human race. If there are no objective rules of behaviour, we should do the next best thing and follow home-spun advice from those who offer it. For many authors lining the self-help aisles, this advice takes the form of an attractive pastiche, a sort of greatest hits, of Eastern and Western ideas.

Before deciding, however, that an informal approach to ethics is part and parcel of modernity, it may be worth considering again the ethical framework of existentialism.

Existentialism is sometimes derided as more of a literary movement than coherent philosophy, more a Continental café pose than true insight. I argue below that this sort of criticism is unfair and that existentialism offers a startlingly profound way of understanding what it means to be human and to live in the world. I then propose some original refinements to Jean-Paul-Sartre's theory of existentialism, which: (a) suggest that the only way to achieve the 'authenticity'

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of action urged by existentialism is through gaining, and acting in accordance with, the character traits of self-awareness and empathy; (b) show that, understood in this way, existentialism's insistence upon authenticity imposes a material constraint upon the scope of human behaviour, far greater than is popularly believed; and (c) better enable existentialism to be used as a practical approach to making moral decisions.

Existentialism as a theory of freedom

It is possible to be an existentialist if you believe in a form of God – Søren Kierkegaard, one of the first existentialists, did so – but there is a considerable tension between existentialist and religious thought. For the purposes of this essay, I address (in particular) Sartre's conception of atheistic existentialism – a philosophical outlook which takes for granted the premise that there is neither a God nor an objective code of morality governing human behaviour. I do not argue for or against this premise in this essay: these topics have been carefully explored elsewhere.

A more interesting (and, frankly, more debatable question) is what is left if there are no objective ethical rules. Dostoyevsky has famously been attributed as saying, 'if there is no God, everything is permitted'.[1]

Existentialist thought examines this conclusion more closely. In short, an existentialist believes the singular fact of human existence is that people are free to choose how they will act. This responsibility to choose falls upon each person by virtue of them being born into a world lacking objective values and rules. Opting not to choose is not a way out from that responsibility; it is an abdication of that responsibility. The result of such abdication is that one lives a life of self-deception: claiming excuses for one's conduct which are not valid. A failure to face up to this responsibility is merely opting to allow oneself to be ruled by convention, emotion or *ad hoc* behaviours (e.g. the pastiche of self-help

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bookstores). One is no less responsible for doing so; one is, by virtue of not facing up to the true canvas of our own possibility to transcend our circumstances, simply not fully-realised as a human being. In this way existentialist thought reflects Socrates' exhortation: an unexamined life is not worth living.

Existentialism as a theory of subjectivity

It is possible to overstate, and also unprofitably to debate, the true degree of freedom encountered by each individual with respect to each decision. To me, a better way to understand existentialism is that it is a theory of subjectivity. In the absence of objective values, the meaning, significance and value of one's life and one's actions are not fixed constants but the products of one's subjective engagement with the world. This is not to say that a state of pessimistic nihilism must pervade. It is to state that, just as there is no good art, or a beautiful day, without some human perspective to appreciate it, there is no good or kind action without some person who deems it so. True, if a tree falls in a forest and no-one hears it, it still falls – but whether the fall is tragic, savage, unlucky or foreboding depends upon a person witnessing and interpreting the fall. Meaning is subjective and necessarily an internal construction of external events.

In this way, existentialism tells us something very important. If our actions and life are to have meaning, we must give it that meaning.

This premise seems to me to be uplifting. Existentialism has often been accused of focussing on the precipice of human choice – the angst, anguish and despair caused by the possibilities open to individuals and their ultimate responsibility for the paths they choose. But when the focus is shifted from the realm of right and wrong to the broader question of where one finds meaning in a world which offers none up in a ready-made package, it becomes a philosophy of hope through reflection and creativity.

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The hope resides in the fact that we have the power to create beauty by seeing it and we have the power to act in accordance with values by simply doing so. We can always choose to be different and, to each of our own minds, better than we were yesterday. We, alone, are responsible for seeking out and finding the magic in our own lives. Thus, if you have ever smiled listening to a symphony or at the thought of a loved one, you have fashioned beauty and kindness out of an amoral world.

Moreover, although our own perspective is necessarily unique, we are not alone. Perhaps the greatest joy for human beings is to find others who share our values, find joy where we find joy, see beauty where we see beauty, and will love us for ourselves. Existentialism tells us that love, if given for authentic reasons, is the ultimate expression of commitment by giving: for there is no reason, other than an individual's own free choice, which can explain it.

Existentialism as a practical moral philosophy

By framing existentialism as a broad inquiry of how one lives a meaningful life, there become two basic questions we must all ask, namely:

(a) How should I live to be most fulfilled?

(b) How should I treat other people?

Modern analytical philosophy has largely ignored question (a) and its attempts to answer question (b) through objectivity and logic, including rules-based ethics (called deontologies), consequence-based ethics (such as utilitarianism) and principle-based ethics (such as Kant's Categorical Imperative: that we all must act as if, by so acting, we are willing our conduct to be a universal rule) are rejected by existentialists. It is also fair to say that, on

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their own account, they are unconvincing. Logic cannot give us an ultimate reason as to why a substantive rule of conduct is so. Existentialism offers a far more credible explanation: there are no *a priori* answers – there are only the answers which each of us will choose.

Does this mean that all that is left is a moral relativism, an 'anything goes' culture, in which one answer is as good as another; and we may as well seek what wisdom there is to be gleaned from the self-help bookshelves?

Not quite. Existentialism imposes one important limit on how one can answer the two key questions, which stems from the nature of existential choice itself. To appreciate and then make one's choices in the world we must free ourselves of self-deception and see ourselves truly and the world as it really is. Otherwise we are not facing up to the true responsibility of living in a world where meaning and ethics are subjective; we are pretending an objectivity, or constraint, where none really exists. Thus, in making decisions, one must be free of the self-deception that there is an external system which is responsible for those decisions (such as God, or social pressure) or that one's own immutable limitations of character (such as cowardice, racism, homophobia) prevent one from choosing differently. One must also free oneself of ignorance insofar as is possible. Whilst values are subjective, facts are not. If facts are relevant to making a decision and knowable to the decision-maker, the decision-maker cannot claim ignorance of those facts to excuse his or her responsibility for acting.

The state of being free from self-deception is authenticity. To existentialists, this is the only 'true' value. Sartre has emphasised the overriding importance of actions and not intentions in the assessment of authenticity. A person reveals themselves by their choices, which may show a person to be different than he or she believed. There are thus two ways one can fail to be authentic: one is by denying the possibility of action which really exists (e.g. a coward); the other is by pretending one has chosen to be something one is not (e.g. a dreamer). The task for all individuals is to see themselves as they really are and to see

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other people as having the same reality and capacity for thoughts and feelings as oneselves.

Thus, existentialism can, to some extent, be reconciled with virtue theory and even with Aristotle's character-based ethics. Instead of trying to find a substantive answer to the two major questions in life, each person's object should be to find a perfect state of honesty and understanding (i.e. authenticity) from which to contemplate the decisions they should take.

Self-awareness and empathy as the touchstones of authenticity

With respect to question (a) – how should I live to be fulfilled – the relevant state of honesty and understanding is called *self-awareness*.

With respect to question (b) – how should I treat other people – the relevant state of honesty and understanding is called *empathy*.

It can be seen that an authentic way of approaching these two questions precludes some forms of reasoning.

As to question (a), a person is never justified in claiming that what will make them fulfilled is (without reflection) that which others (such as society, advertising or convention) suggest will lead to fulfilment. Everyone must search themselves and ask: is this what I really want for my life? If one decides that they will be fulfilled only by, for instance, abandoning their family, they must accept that. But in coming to this decision, one must be brutally honest and not pretend, for instance, that they intend to return in a years' time, or that they are really leaving because it will be 'for the best'. Convention and platitudes must be banished. A self-aware person, considering their motives honestly, they may come to a different conclusion about what they wish to do. But they may not.

This does not mean that a person must blindly do what will fulfil them. A person must also take account of the

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consequences of one's actions for other people: question (b). Practical existentialism dictates that one must act with respect to all other people knowing that they are equally real; with hopes, dreams, fears and their own lives to live. A person must also know that no-one is, ontologically, more important than anyone else (even ourselves). If we elevate one person on account of social status, wealth or fame, we are choosing to do so; and could equally choose otherwise. An empathetic person cannot deny or hide from themselves the harm and the pain they cause to others.

This is the context in which we must all make our decisions, decide what music to listen to, decide whether to see beauty in the sunlight or only glare, decide how to treat our family, who and how to love.

The balance between our own fulfilment and our treatment of others is something which falls to be decided through the system of values we must each create. Of overriding importance is the extent to which we choose, in our quest for self-fulfilment, to interfere with the lives of others. This choice – the extent to which we decide we are justified, as merely one person, to limit someone else's freedom by our own actions – arises constantly in life, and on each occasion must be faced directly and honestly.

At one stage Sartre suggested that by choosing for yourself, you choose for all people; on the basis that to choose is to affirm the value of the thing chosen. Although he lapsed somewhat into Kantian language, he captured a profound insight, which provides a further key to why existentialism is uplifting rather than depressing.

There is reason to believe that values and a sense of right and wrong are hard-wired into humanity. Our own experience shows that when we act as we judge rightly, we feel gratified; but when we act as we judge wrongly, we feel remorse. It has been argued, based on biological evidence, that a sense (though not the content) of morality is grounded in our biology.[2] What is more, the very language of right and wrong necessarily implies right and wrong not just for me, but for all people. If I choose to live my life by

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the values of love and compassion, I am deciding that I think this is the best way for me to live and to act towards my fellow humans. In some way, I am also deciding that I think this is the best way for my fellow humans to act towards me.

There is a 'for whom the bell tolls' resonance to this point. While we all must make our own decisions, we are not alone, but are alive in a world with others who share our common humanity and will share our eventual fate. A practical existentialist should aim to bridge the gap between oneself and others as far as possible, so as to make one's decisions in the full knowledge of our own and others' humanity.

Thus, anyone who truly appreciates their canvas of existential choice and who faces up to that responsibility, must create an ethical framework of values and meaning, which both guides their actions and emerges from those actions. An existentialist cannot appeal to universality for that framework. However, by choosing the values one wants to live by, one is choosing to define and create oneself and the actions one inflicts on others.

History and experience shows that the dark side of human behaviour cannot be legislated away. Some people will choose in a way which seems repugnant. The only true criticism is that the person made their decision through self-deception: that they were not authentic. This is much more powerful than it might appear and, I argue, a genuine constraint on behaviour. In very many cases, the cause of self-assertion over others is that a person is thoughtless (e.g. has not taken the position of others fully into account) or falsely self-justified (e.g. has convinced themselves that they are 'entitled' to act in a certain way and that others are 'deserving' of the negative effects of the actor's conduct). But each person's ultimate responsibility of choice abrogates these forms of reasoning.

It is likely that people who are self-aware and empathetic, who make their decisions on the basis of all available information, who understand as fully as possible different

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perspectives and claims of others, and who understand the momentous responsibility of taking responsibility for their own actions and that there is no ultimate excuse for interfering with other's lives, will tend to act with kindness and compassion towards others.

What of a person who, nevertheless, acts authentically but in a way with which we disagree? At this point, we ourselves must choose how to respond. We can choose to tolerate the different behaviour as being the expression of someone else's free will. Or we can choose to oppose the behaviour. If we do so, we act knowing that the basis for our opposition is not our monopoly on proper ethical conduct, but merely our own values. This sets up a confrontation based fundamentally on the assertion of different ways to live. In this case, all of the non-ethical forms of argument which we use in our everyday lives can be used; such as appeals to better information and to expediency, efficiency, common sense and the relative balance of impacts and consequences.

What cannot be used is an appeal to ultimate 'trumping' values. Value-conflict confrontation is the ultimate sanction available to each of us as the font of our own values. An existentialist should each realise that to criticise another not because they have violated an immutable law, but because their actions are contrary to one's own values, is a bold step. To paraphrase Sartre, before acting every man should ask, am I such a man that I ought to act in opposition to another's will? A person who appreciates the weight of that question will, hopefully, answer it with judgment and responsibility.

Conclusion

In this way, existentialism is well-suited to the complexities of a globalised, cosmopolitan world, in which different ways of living and acting take place in ever closer proximity. It requires discipline and responsibility and explains how

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meaning and values come to exist through individual choice. Most importantly, far from being a charter for relativism, it provides two bedrock values, self-awareness and empathy, which are needed to make authentic choices.

Existentialism thus offers a philosophical foundation on the basis of which some self-help style advice can be very useful. Anything which offers techniques to become more self-aware (perhaps by meditating and mastering one's emotions) and more empathetic (perhaps by seeking to be more patient and listening better to others) is good advice.

Moreover, existentialism tells us, subject to the constraint of authenticity, one must decide one's own values and how to live. There is of course much wisdom available to assist in making those decisions. The message of existentialism is simply that no matter how good the advice or esteemed its author, one must always choose for oneself. As a self-help book might say: there is no better time to start than now.

Daniel Kalderimis is a working lawyer in New Zealand. daniel.kalderimis@gmail.com

Notes

[1] In fact, whilst this is a fairly accurate summary of Ivan Karamazov's philosophical approach in *The Brothers Karamazov*, it is unclear that this quote appeared in that book or in other writings by Dostoevsky.

[2] Marc D Hauser, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong* (London: Little, Brown, 2006).

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