

Existentialism—Does It Have a Future?

I would say that Sartre, despite his incontestable strengths of mind, talent, and character, is still the man who derailed existentialism, sent it right off the track. In part, this may have been because he gave too wide a berth to Heidegger's thought. Heidegger spent his working life laboring mightily in the crack of philosophy's buttocks, right there in the cleft between Being and Becoming. I would go so far as to suggest Heidegger was searching for a viable connection between the human and the divine that would not inflame too irreparably the reigning post-Hitler German mandarins who were in no rush to forgive his past and would hardly encourage his tropism toward the non-rational.

Sartre, however, was comfortable as an atheist even if he had no fundament on which to plant his philosophical feet. To hell with that, he

didn't need it. He was ready to survive in mid-air. We are French, he was ready to say. We have minds, we can live with the absurd and ask for no reward. That is because we are noble enough to live with emptiness, and strong enough to choose a course which we are even ready to die for. And we will do this in whole defiance of the fact that, indeed, we have no footing. We do not look to a Hereafter.

It was an attitude; it was a proud stance; it was equal to living with one's mind in formless space, but it deprived existentialism of more interesting explorations. For atheism is a crop-less undertaking when it comes to philosophy. (We need only think of Logical Positivism!) Atheism can contend with ethics (as Sartre did on occasion most brilliantly) but when it comes to metaphysics, atheism ends in a locked cell. It is, after all, near to impossible for a philosopher to explore into how we are here without entertaining some notion of what the prior force might have been. Cosmic speculation is asphyxiated if existence came into being ex nihilo. In Sartre's case—worse. Existence came into being without a clue to suggest whether we are here for good purpose, or there is no reason whatsoever for us.

All the same, Sartre's philosophical talents were damnably virtuoso. He was able to function with precision in the upper echelons of every logical structure he set up. If only he had not been an existentialist! For an existentialist who does not believe in some kind of Other is equal to an engineer who designs an automobile which requires no driver and accepts no passengers. If existentialism is to flourish (that is, develop through a series of new philosophers building on earlier premises) it needs a God who is no more confident of the end than we are; a God who is an artist, not a law-giver; a God who suffers the uncertainties of existence; a God who lives without any of the pre-arranged guarantees that sit like an incubus upon formal theology with its flatulent, self-serving assumption of a Being who is All-Good and All-Powerful. What a gargantuan oxymoron—All-Good and All-Powerful. It is certain to maroon any and all formal theologians who would like to explain an earthquake. Before the wrath of a tsunami, they can only break wind. The notion of an existential God, a Creator who may have been doing His or Her artistic best, but could still have been remiss in designing the tectonic plates, is not within their scope.

Sartre was alien to the possibility that existentialism might thrive if it would just assume that indeed we do have a God who, no matter His or Her cosmic dimensions, (whether larger or smaller than we assume), embodies nonetheless some of our faults, our ambitions, our talents, and our gloom. For the end is not written. If it is, there is no place for existentialism. Base our beliefs, however, on the fact of our existence, and it takes no great step for us to assume that we are not only individual, but may well be a vital part of a larger phenomenon which searches for some finer vision of life that could conceivably emerge from our present human condition. There is no reason, one can argue, why this assumption is not nearer to the real being of our lives than anything the oxymoronic theologians would offer us. It is certainly more reasonable than Sartre's ongoing assumption—despite his passionate desire for a better society—that we are here willy-nilly and must manage to do the best we can with endemic nothingness installed upon eternal floorlessness. Sartre was indeed a writer of major dimension, but he was also a philosophical executioner. He guillotined existentialism just when we needed most to hear its howl, its barbaric yawp that there is something in common between God and all of us. We, like God, are imperfect artists doing the

best we can. We may succeed or fail—God as well as us. That is the implicit if undeveloped air of existentialism. We would do well to live again with the Greeks, live again with the expectation that the end remains open but human tragedy may well be our end. Great hope has no real footing unless one is willing to face into the doom that may also be on the way. Those are the poles of our existence—as they have been from the first instant of the Big Bang. Something immense may now be stirring, but to meet it we will do better to expect that life will not provide the answers we need so much as it will offer the privilege of improving our questions.

Norman Mailer