

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

GOD AND MAN AND MAILER

A tsunami of letters—from Jews, Catholics, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics, humanists, existentialists and the unaffiliated (almost all of them men)—denounced Norman Mailer's "On Sartre's God Problem," our June 6 reprint of Mailer's remarks, in Libération, commemorating the centenary of Jean-Paul Sartre's birth. A sampling follows.

—The Editors

Fitchburg, Mass.

■ Sartre had no God problem, but obviously Norman Mailer does. Without a scintilla of evidence, Mailer promotes the notion of a "God who is an artist," an imperfect God "who suffers the uncertainties of existence." Of course, Mailer is free to hypothesize about the divine, but even he has no authority to suggest that Sartre somehow fell short by refusing to embrace such speculative religiosity. Mailer criticizes Sartre for being "alien to the possibility that existentialism might thrive" if it would simply "assume that indeed we do have a God," but he should realize that such "assumptions" were perhaps too "simple" for a thinker of Sartre's caliber.

DAVID A. NIOSE

North Miami Beach, Fla.

■ Poor Norman Mailer, who is lost and rudderless in his narcissistic semanticisms and agnosticisms. And poor *Nation* readers, who deserve to celebrate Sartre's centenary with greater insights, higher hopes and better existential road maps to the potentials of the present pregnant moment for self and social actualization of our humanity.

RALPH ALAN DALE

New York City

■ It's down on our knees, is it, Norman? Of course you've always had the inside line on cleanliness, godliness and sexiness, and now you have the special authority that comes with senility. But your basic point is well taken. We wasted too much of our youth heeding the dictates of Sartre. When I'm your age I hope to be able to write much the same dismissal of your inflated reputation. Not, however, on the grounds of atheism. Just windbagery.

THOMAS DISCH

Baltimore

■ Norman Mailer's view of the universe seems absurdly anthropocentric and ethically limited. To suggest that the devastation wrought by a tsunami is evidence of a failure in the design of tectonic plates, as if the whole universe ought to be designed for the accommodation of humans, is rather like suggesting that your armpit ought to be designed for the accommodation of the trillion or so bacteria that live there and the unpredictable cataclysms wrought by inundation

with soap are evidence of divine neglect.

The body of the earth may be supposed to have its own purposes, independent of those of its residents, though interacting with them. The failure of humans to understand those purposes or seek ways to minimize the adverse interactions is not evidence of divine limitations but of our own. Many of these are chosen, not intrinsic; We know enough that we could do better if we would. Blaming an imperfect God for the results of our own environmentally reckless and personally callous choices is a callow cop-out.

KATHARINE W. RYLAARSDAM

Jerusalem

■ It is wonderful receiving a theology lesson from Norman Mailer. He has re-created God in his image with a bit of help from William James's finite moral maker of the universe. However, in lambasting the God of religion he forgets the most important quality of the God of the religious tradition he ostensibly comes from. The God of Judaism not only demands mankind's participation in shaping the world—God demands mankind's walking in the way of God in compassion, kindness and goodness. This is not a particularly Mailerean theme, but it is the heart of the traditional Jewish vision of the world and provides the guideline to all the ideal and visionary transformative movements that would bring mankind to greater justice and well-being.

SHALOM FREEDMAN

Boston

■ Norman Mailer concludes that we have a "real need for a God with whom we can engage our lives." This reminds me of the title of a book I saw once: *If You Can't Live Without Me, How Come You Aren't Dead Yet?* In theology as in romance, there is no guarantee we'll get what we need, and yet we struggle along somehow. Both kinds of frustration probably help keep novelists in business. JOHN BERGSTROM

Longmeadow, Mass.

■ Norman Bates of *Psycho* fame would have provided better commentary than Norman Mailer. Given the choice between a flatulent writer of fiction and a fictional character, I'll go with the man of character! What Mailer lacks in his understanding of philosophy is exceeded only by what he lacks in his understanding of the fields of writing, astronomy, political theory and common sense. He is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. His tales are those of an idiot. He *is* an idiot! In the future, try to get a thoughtful person to comment on the centenary of a philosopher. Don't give the job to a celebrity who exists as a legend in his own mind. JOHN J. FITZGERALD

MAILER REPLIES

Provincetown, Mass.

■ The letters by David Niose, Ralph Alan Dale, Thomas Disch, John Bergstrom and John Fitzgerald read like blogs from Lower Swamp Hollow. They are as *ad hominem* as mosquitoes. If I were a good Christian, I might say, "Oh, Lord, they, too, are Your creatures and they need a little blood so much. Let them have mine."

In contrast, the letter from Jerusalem by Shalom Freedman was good rabbinic boilerplate. As one Jew to another, I would ask Shalom, "What, then, was the Holocaust? Should we look upon it as our punishment? Has Jehovah come back because we Jews do not walk sufficiently 'in compassion, kindness, and goodness,' or does the Holocaust reinforce my supposition that God is not All-Powerful?"

Katharine W. Rylaarsdam's letter is interesting. Does she suggest at the end that our pollution of the earth was related to the tsunami? In the middle, she is certainly forthright when she states that the earth is independent of us. The thought does suggest a schism within our deity; otherwise, it must posit more than one god for world and earthly affairs. This again, opens the real possibility that the Lord is not All-Good and All-Powerful. Too bad! We seem to have a need to cling like leeches to a theological oxymoron.

NORMAN MAILER