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SARTRE'S HUMANISM VERSUS BIBLICAL HUMANISM

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Introduction

My reflections in this paper focus on Jean Paul Sartre's claim that his existentialist philosophy offers the only valid method for the study of humankind, and therefore it represents true humanism.¹ My purpose is to analyze this claim and its consequences in our culture, and to suggest an alternative.

First we intend to define what we mean by humanism for there are different interpretations of the term. In one way it is used as in the Renaissance sense of the late 14th to 16th Centuries.

The life of human beings is what it can be in the present time, here and now, as stated in the expression "rejoice in the present life; all else is beyond thee." Humanism was comprehended as the classical Greek and Romans believed: Pleasure was the sense of the word.

Another sense of the word was used in the Enlightenment Movement of the 18th Century. In this view, humanism means the exaltation of man's reason. With it he can do whatever he desires; all accomplishments in the sciences, arts and languages that became the foundations of our western culture, these were the results of human intelligence. The potential for progress is seen as unlimited.

However, the modern use of the term humanism means that man is the

¹*Existentialism is a Humanism* -- (English Mairet, p. 65)

creator of culture and technology. He became the Lord of the world, and freedom, as the center of humanist interest, is the driving force that can dominate nature by means of scientific analysis and technological application, as well as in respect to the social sciences. Freedom in this humanistic conception is seen as an ideal.

So, pleasure, reason and freedom are the characteristics of what we understand by humanism to encompass.

Christians believing in the Bible, have another view of what we can understand by humanism.

In essence, the Biblical concept is the relation between God and human beings, Creator and creatures, addressed in the covenant. But God is the beginning, and He gave His words in the revelation of His will. The pole has changed, so man is not sovereign of the world, but God, in His love gave to human beings freedom of choices, reason to develop culture and the use of nature and pleasure in obedient response to His love and mercy, redemption of men at the image of God.

We can recognise in Contemporary Philosophies four types of humanism: 1st) Realism and Idealism, 2nd) Marxism, 3rd) Existentialism, 4th) Biblical Humanism. The first three exaggerate human values, they sustain the antithesis between Culture and Religion, Humanism and Christianity. The fourth, Biblical Humanism relates Culture with Religion, Values with human beings as moral persons. This concept doesn't exclude nothing from man but includes the relation between God and human beings.

That's why we can say that a Biblical Humanism exists and can be designed as Theocentric. God is always related to human beings and these

are seen in a holistic viewpoint. Joy, liberty and progress are not denied, each person is seen as unique, different from each other but accepting God as his creator and redeemer in one faith!

Historical Review

Searching for the way in which best to understand ourselves as human beings has been a perennial quest. Oriental cosmogonies, like the Zend Avesta of the Persians and the Vedas of the Hindus, testify to the questioning of ancient poets concerning the nature of human beings. The philosophers of classical and Hellenistic Greece--Socrates, Plato and Aristotle--were particularly concerned with this subject. The ethical schools that flourished in the second century B.C., the Stoics, the Epicureans and the Cynics, also tried to find the ultimate answer to this, the most troublesome question for all human beings: What is man?

The Renaissance, which in the 15th century discovered the richness of classical antiquity, found, now within a well established Christianity, a new way to affirm that human beings are "the measure of all things". While medieval scholasticism tried to maintain the supremacy of theology as the science of revelation, the new humanism extolled the values of art, politics, and the emerging sciences.

It was not until the 17th century that the word "humanism" came to be used to designate the classic literature and philosophy of the Greeks and Romans. The term, used mainly in the universities, was coined to differentiate the study of things using human authorities from the study of the same things theologically.

The first one to give to the term "humanism" a philosophical connotation was R. Descartes (1637), who argued that the first postulate on which all further reasoning becomes possible is, "I think, therefore I am." That was the only postulate about which he could not entertain some doubt. Since he existed as an imperfect being, it was logical to think that perfection existed somewhere, so as to make imperfection possible. Then, the one who exists as perfect is God, and he created the world and the universe. What makes Descartes unique is that for him the existence of a human being constitutes the point of departure for his thinking about God and the world. It is on this account that sometimes Descartes is identified as the first existentialist.

The Enlightenment of the 18th century was fostered by Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Hume, and Kant, among many others. All of them followed Descartes in finding in a human being the first step of the ladder toward knowledge of the world. The second half of the 19th century brought about a significant change. The rise of materialism and evolutionism placed human beings in a more complex mix. Marx saw human beings caught in the struggle between capital and labor and in need of catching up with history. For Darwin human beings were just another species in an evolutionary process where the strongest survives. Nietzsche gave humanity a clarion call to stand up and take responsibility for history, since history is to be made up supermen who, like the phoenix bird of the ancient Greek myth, will rise from the ashes of human enslavement and use their will to overcome on their own.

We may summarize, affirming that in our century a humanism that,

since the time of the Renaissance has been breaking away from traditional theological considerations, permeates the cultural horizon of Western Humanity. Indeed, even some theologians have also adopted its basic premises.

In actual practice, God is ignored, or not needed for an underlying hypothesis, or it is openly declared that He doesn't exist. Human beings are the architects of their destiny.

Existentialism: Major Figures

It must be recognized that existentialism is very difficult, or impossible, to define. By definition, existentialists are persons unto themselves. What they share is the view that each person as an individual who exists must realize his/her own essence. This means that the subject to be studied is first and foremost our own subjectivity. Thus, there is no doubt that the starting point is the human being.

It is to be noted, as a historical fact, that what gave existentialism its hayday were the conditions brought about by the two world wars of the first half of our century. The suffering, the horror, the destruction of much of urban Europe, the great numbers of homeless refugees, left all of Europe deeply depressed, frustrated, and skeptical. Despair was not an anomaly. Between the wars and, especially, immediately following the second world war, France, Germany, Italy and Spain became fertile soil for existentialism.

Taking the notion of the existence of God as the criterion for classification, we may distinguish three types of existentialists. First,

those who deny the existence of God: Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir. Second, those who affirm the existence of God, but consider His existence only as a necessary hypothesis, required to explain other things. Faith is necessary particularly in boundary situations: the Catholic Gabriel Marcel and the protestant Karl Jaspers. Finally, those who sidestep the issue: Martin Heidegger.

Existentialism wanted to be the answer for men problems, as an existent, each one must develop his essence, living, choosing and creating cultural objects during his life.

The figure best known is Jean Paul Sartre, he declares that his existentialism is a humanism, but if we study his philosophy, we may conclude that it will be better to call it an Anthropology, in fact that he try to describe man's situation in this world and without God.

Jean Paul Sartre

Among existentialist's Sartre is probably the one best known. This may be due to the fact that he not only wrote in the traditional philosophical manner but also, more significantly, he wrote plays and novels. His two philosophical books are Being and Nothingness (1943) and Existentialism is a Humanism (1945). Sartre, however, became influential not only on account of his writings. He became a living example of an existentialist, and as such he became the incarnation of a "life style" for a whole generation of young people the world over, many of whom had never read any of his books.

Jean Paul Sartre was born in Paris in 1905. His higher studies were

done at the Ecole Normal of Paris, and later he taught philosophy at Lycées in La Havre and in Paris.

During the Second World War he joined the French army and was captured and released in 1941. When he returned to teaching, he also was a participant in the Resistance Movement.

He continued writing novels and plays. His favorite place to write was at a table in one of the classic Cafes of Paris. In 1960 he attempted to combine existentialism with marxism in a book called "Critique de la Raison Dialectique" without success. In 1964 Sartre declined the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in 1980.

What is Man?

In his first novel, Nausea (1938), Sartre asks, What is Man? His answer is that human beings come into existence by chance, if not against their will certainly not with their consent. They have been thrown into existence without exercising any of the choices which would have given them the basis for valuing what they received when they were born. Still, they find themselves existing. They now have to create themselves, affirm their essence, by their actions. Their destiny is totally in their hands. The main protagonist of the novel says, "All human beings are born without a reason, continue living out of weakness and die returning to nothing."² "To exist is simply to be there."³ In other words, human

²J. P. Sartre, *Existentialism of the Ego*, Reprinted. Ed. William Spanes, NY, 1966, p. 289.

³J. P. Sartre, *Nausea*. English Penguin Edition, p. 188.

existence takes place encompassed by nothingness while human beings live walking toward death. It should not surprise us when the novel ends with the main protagonist characterizing human existence as "Nausea."

Such sentiment toward life has become rather common among many today. Others have characterized it as "Absurd." For these people life is only the present moment. One needs only to find the way to make the present moment as pleasant as possible. Tomorrow, basically, has no meaning.

Freedom

Another of Sartre's propositions is that what constitutes a human being is his freedom. To choose between possibilities is the one thing which those who have life actually possess. Each person is the owner of his/her actions, and the only one responsible for them, therefore unaccountable to anyone else. Thus each person creates his/her own life, taking control of circumstances.

Sartre stated this notion in a rather striking phrase: "Man is condemned to be free." Obviously, this is a paradox. One condemned is not free, and the one free is not serving a sentence. Sartre's intention is clear, however. He wished to dramatize the human inability to escape from having to make choices. Each person must decide for him/herself on the basis of his/her best judgment. There are no set rules or norms that make choices easy. Society does not possess transcendent authoritative principles with which to guide the moral and the social life of individuals.

Late in his career Sartre introduced the notion of "engagement" or

"commitment" as a factor in human relations both at the family and the labor union levels. Human beings enter into agreements for a specified amount of time under certain conditions. They are free from these agreements, however, when the stipulations contained in them are not kept. For many today, it would seem, marriage is no more than an "engagement" from which one may easily be released. Human beings whose essence is freedom find it hard to work for ideals that transcend them and may easily end up considering life as absurd.

In one of his later novels, Dirty Hands, one of its heroes says that he doesn't want to live and doesn't want life either. He feels he is unnecessary and alone. He feels that nobody loves him or trusts in him. Here we have the picture of an anguished soul facing its total alienation from existence itself. An analysis of the themes in Sartre's novels reveals that a pervasive fatalism is viewed as perfectly normal.

Conscience and Sin

Characteristic of human existence as distinct from every other existing thing is that not only do human beings exist, they also are conscious of their own existence and of the world around them. Human beings reflect about their existence. For Sartre, this consciousness has a special significance. Being free, when they become aware of their existence, human beings experience anguish. Their very awareness of being alive with freedom expresses itself as anguish which, as their conscience, is the illness of being human. It becomes a wedge between feelings and actions and produces abnormal anxieties. It is not difficult,

on the basis of this account of the conscience, to imagine Sartre's notion of sin. It is only a word with no sense at all. As such it does not exist.

Evaluation

There is no doubt that Sartre's philosophy has had a major influence on our western culture, especially the culture of the young. For many today "authentic" living, means the expression of a reckless freedom which knows no transcendent values. They exemplify Dostoievsky's dictum, "If God does not exist, any action is permitted."⁴ Human beings have come to see themselves as legislators and judges of their own conduct, responsible to no one else. One of Sartre's disciples, Simone de Beauvoir, stated in her book The Morality of Ambiguity that if the goal is good all means are also good. This kind of reasoning has justified much guerrilla fighting and other forms of violence used in the name of supposedly good causes. We, then, can conclude that if Sartre's humanism really is correct then choosing what he affirmed means choosing between the absurd and the reasonable, pessimism or optimism, desperation or hope, atheism or faith in God.

Biblical Humanism

It is not necessary for us to accept Sartre's account of the human condition. If, as Sartre insisted, we must exercise our freedom and realize our essence by the choices we make, we must come to an

⁴J. P. Sartre. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. English Mairret, p. 56.

understanding of human existence aware that Biblical Christianity offers a much better alternative account. David's question, "What is man that thou art mindful of him" (Ps. 8:4), finds an answer in the same Psalm, "Thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor" (8:5).

Those who believe in the Bible don't rely exclusively on classical literature in order to get an understanding of what human beings are, what their purpose is, which values should guide their behavior, or which is their final destiny. The basic postulate of a Christian philosophy is that God has revealed his will in the Bible. Within this framework, human beings occupy a special place, since they were made in God's image, after His likeness (Gen. 1:27). It follows that they are not the product of irrational forces acting within a random selection process, not an accident, or are not existences thrown into the world against their will. The Bible presents not only the origins of humankind, but also the purpose for its creation. To humankind God gave the commission to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28), or as the Psalm puts it, "Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet" (8:6). Christians understand that they occupy a unique position within creation and bear the responsibility to study and investigate all things in it, and to develop its potentials to the fullest. Thus Christians are also involved in the creation of culture and technology and appreciate the way in which they enhance human life on earth. Still, they don't reduce their horizon to the material world. They recognize that human beings share in that transcendence of the One who created them.

They also understand, however, that as creatures, created by God with freedom, our first parents chose to disobey the one restriction God had placed on them. Thus they chose to become independent and to challenge God's place as the creator and giver of life. That was the beginning of a kind of humanism that persists until this day.

Still, in spite of the presence of sin within creation, human beings are capable of making good use of the capacities given them by God. As Solomon wrote, "He has put eternity into man's mind" (Ecl. 3:11). Human beings have developed arts and sciences which are good to the extent that "the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world" (John 1:9). In order to fulfill our commission to be the stewards of creation, we have been endowed with the ability to create the instruments of culture that facilitate the discharge of this responsibility.

Christian humanism sees human beings as unique, but not in splendid isolation. Rather, they are unique as members of communities that begin with families and include even the whole of the human race. That is why many social reforms, like the recognition of the value of work, the abolition of slavery, the liberation of women, the improvement of life in the home, have all be fostered by a Christianity which finds its roots in the Hebrew people.

It is for these reasons that only Christianity can give an adequate account of human existence. It includes creation in the image of God, with a clear sense of the purpose of life, what its possibilities and responsibilities are, and what its ultimate restoration will achieve. Christian humanism gives a complete answer to the question, What is man?

Each one of us is the object of God's special care, created in his image, fallen into sin, but justified and restored so that, as Paul says, God "is the source of your life in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:30).

Our contemporaries offer a false alternative between a life lived in the presence of God and life led by human philosophy. For many the Deism of the 17th century still offers the way out. Whereas we are here on earth taking care of things, God is somewhere out there in the Universe totally unconcerned with what is going on here. He is like a watchmaker who, after having designed and manufactured a fine instrument, now lets it run on its own spring. He is no longer concerned with His creation on a personal basis. Others, like Sartre, affirm the non-existence of God and urge human beings to assume responsibility for the creation of culture and technology.

It is not necessary to accept the above-mentioned alternatives. We as Christians may accept the Biblical account of human existence and also use our God-given talents to develop a humanism that serves the purposes God intended for His creation. As educators we must face up to this challenge. Every philosophy of education is based on the account it gives of human existence. Here is where our philosophy of education must distinguish itself from others.

Biblical Examples

JOB

The ancient book of Job describes for us a man who has not only suffered physically, but has also experienced moral and spiritual

torments. The protagonist in his deep anguish asks constantly, "Why?" As such, Job has become popular with many of our contemporaries as a man in a boundary situation. This is clearly expressed, for example, in lines such as these from Chapter 7. "Has not man a hard service upon earth" (v. 1). "So I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me" (v. 3). "My days . . . come to an end without hope" (v. 6). But then the question: "What is man that thou dost make so much of him?" (v. 17). This is the condition of a man overwhelmed by his sufferings and in a desperate condition. When he finally hears the voice of God from the whirlwind, however, he admits, "I know that thou canst do all things. . . Now my eye sees thee; therefore, I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:2, 5-6).

DAVID

This is another example of what happens to human beings when they find themselves in a sinful condition and, when hope seems to vanish, they recognize God. Pursued by his enemies, accused by his conscience and by the people who knew his sins, David describes in dramatic poetic form, his innermost feelings. Again, a few expressions will illustrate: "When I declare not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long" (Ps. 32:3). "I was dumb and silent, I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me. . . The; I spoke with my tongue: 'Lord, let me know my end'" (Ps. 39:2-4). When he acknowledged his sin and let go of his defenses, what a difference! We can read it in Psalm 32, "Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you

upright in heart!" (v. 11).

SOLOMON

The book of Ecclesiastes describes some of the frustrations of human existence. The first part of the book shows the vanity of all human endeavors. It finds a dim echo in the tragic, contradictory cry characteristic of modern existentialists. Here is a human being who places himself at the center of the universe as the one who is to solve its mystery, only to discover his own interior emptiness. "So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun" (2:20). The last chapter of the book, however, tells us that there is only one answer to all the vanity of human efforts to grab the universe by its handle. "The end of the matter when all has been heard: Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man" (12:13). The greatest tragedy is that human beings attempt to live in God's creation without God. "Behold, this alone I found, that God make man upright, but they have sought out many devices" (7:29). That is why Solomon's advice is to remember our Creator.

PAUL

Romans Chapter 7 describes an experience with which Christians who live in the world of sin can identify. Paul here reflects on the tension created when with the mind, as Christians, we agree with the will of God, but with our bodies, as humans in human society, we find ourselves doing the things we do not agree to. He explodes with the crie du cœur,

"Wretched man that I am!" (7:24). But he ends up proclaiming, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:25). This is the only effective answer to our human condition. Paul also states it well in II Corinthians 4:8, 9. "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies".

This is the classic statement of the Christian attitude toward the problems faced within the human condition. The Bible tells us also that human beings may pass through the experiences of fear, anguish, despair and loneliness, but they look beyond those situations to take the hand of faith in the precious promises of God given in his mercy and love.

Concluding Reflections

Humanistic existentialism leads to a pessimistic and fatalistic concept of life. It offers a dead-end street for us to walk on. As Sartre said, life is a walk to death with nothing in front and nothing behind. This kind of humanism has within it the seeds of its own destruction, even if it affirms as strongly as it does human freedom. In real life human beings are moved by internal and external forces, the instinct for self preservation, the sex drive, anxiety, fears, social and economic factors, cultural pressures. In terms of morality, as their own judges human beings turn out being quite inadequate, and their commitments too self-centered. The exaltation of the existing individual ultimately dehumanizes the human condition, since human beings are created by God

as social beings, dependent on Him and on each other.

Biblical humanism, by contrast, recognizes human beings as creatures made in the image of God who, even though now marred by sin, are destined for glorification. It offers an optimistic conception of life, full of hope. We are invited to draw life from its source in God through Christ Jesus, our Lord. Human beings are challenged to develop their potentialities and build a character. But in this task they do not labor alone. They are not icebergs drifting about in the ocean of death, as the most famous picture of Sartre seems to indicate. Their fate is not to make the best out of the accident of birth. Christianity proclaims the redemption of humanity by the sacrifice of Christ. It also affirms freedom to be a God-given gift, essential to human existence. We must exercise this freedom and choose God, and in Him all other human beings. In this way we establish true commitments which serve as the basis for relationships within the human family. Ultimately Christianity offers all humanity the opportunity to live as daughters and sons of God. Rather than isolating existing individuals as lonely cells having a hard time finding any one willing to share life with them, Christianity aims at the elimination of all the barriers that break up the human family in order to make all of humanity one. As the earliest baptismal formula known to us, which the Apostle Paul quoted to the Galatians, states so eloquently: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Only this is authentic humanism.

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