

EXISTENCE, ESSENCE AND ENLIGHTENMENT

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ABSTRACT: The contrasting positions of existentialism and essentialism run through the whole of Western philosophy and much Eastern thought as well. Comparing Buddhist and Western thought, we can throw some light upon the way that people rooted in these different perspectives misunderstand one another, and see how existentialist principles and experience commonly get transmuted into their opposite.

Marcel coined the term existentialism. Sartre defined it as the philosophy that asserts that existence precedes essence. This famous statement has two main meanings. Firstly, it is a refutation of all the philosophy that asserts that essence precedes existence; in other words, almost all of Christianity and almost everything in philosophy that derives from Plato. This means that existentialism rejects most of Western philosophy. I will here call the view that essence precedes existence, essentialism.

The second meaning that Sartre intends is that essence derives from, or can derive from, existence, and that the human task, therefore, is primarily that of creating some essence, or meaning, out of existence, existence

itself being simply given. Life is not meaningful in itself, but it can be made so. Essentialists believe that life is intrinsically meaningful and that the task is to find that essence. These two tasks might not sound that different, but they do lead to quite different attitudes. Is life a matter of inward search or of outward commitment?

The distinction between existentialism and essentialism is central to many discussions of philosophy and spirituality, often without the participants realising it. In fact, many such discussions are bedevilled by the fact that there are a great many philosophical statements that can be made from either the essentialist or the existentialist position and, although the two sound the same, they mean completely different things depending upon which position the speaker is coming from.

Thus, for instance, there is a good deal of talk about spirituality. Spirit, however, is something that an essentialist believes to be the pre-existing under-pinning of life, its pre-condition, whereas for an existentialist it is something that a person may manage to create through what they do. When we say that what

matters is the spirit in which things are done, we could be suggesting an inward search to discover one's essence or we could be suggesting the need to choose between and commit to things that exist 'out there'.

The modern situation is further confused because many people believe that they have abandoned an essentialist position because, say, they have decided that they no longer believe in God. Yet this person may still really be thinking in an essentialist way. They may now use the word 'self' instead of the word 'soul' but the basic structure of thinking is unchanged. Even God can be approached either in an essentialist or an existentialist manner.

Thus, there are existentialist theologians. Tillich is one who is well known. Tillich's position is, however, a mixed one and this mix throws some light upon the philosophical dilemmas we are talking about. Thus Tillich has a basically existential ontology like that of Sartre. Sartre sees the task of life to be to create essence out of existence through the path of commitment. Every time we confront a choice, an either-or situation, we have to commit ourselves. We may do this cleanly and authentically or, as is often the case, we pretend that 'I had no choice' or arrange things in such a way that the decision seems to have been made for us by others. Inauthenticity is thus one of the great sins in existentialism.

Now Tillich agrees with Sartre that there is a drive toward authenticity. He in fact called this drive the 'ground of our being'. Tillich identifies this with God. God is this urge toward authenticity. This comes, however, very close to saying that this urge is the essence of a person and to saying that

it is a pre-condition of human life. Tillich therefore runs very close to the essentialist position and some would say that he crosses over into the other camp.

There are analogues of all these discussions within the realm of Buddhist philosophy. Thus, in Buddhism, we have the concept of the primal vow. The term

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primal vow refers to a person's deepest intention, the intention to become a Buddha so as to benefit all sentient beings. Is this primal vow, however, something we create or something we are born with? In other words, is it, as Sartre might say, the deepest authenticity we are capable of giving rise to, or is it the essence of our being, the 'face we had before we were conceived'. Is it distinguishable from Tillich's 'God'? There are Buddhists who will take it one way and others who take it the other.

Another similar term in even more common use in Buddhist circles is the term 'Buddha nature'. Precisely the

same conundrum arises. Is Buddha nature the essence of the person - another word for soul (Christian), Self (Jungian) or actualising tendency (Humanist)? Or, is Buddha nature simply a way of saying 'existence'. If one were to ask, 'Does a dog have Buddha nature?' would one be asking, 'Does the dog have an essence, a meaning, a purpose, etc, that is the pre-condition for it being a dog?' or is one asking, 'Does a dog have a full and rightful place among the things that exist?' In the symbolic language of Zen

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Buddhism, for 'dog' one can read, 'the instinctive, animal nature of a person'.

When Zen Master Jossu answered 'No' to this question, which question was he answering? If it was the essentialist question, as is likely, then he was asserting that the human being is what he or she exists as, and is not an incarnation of any 'essence' or 'atman' or 'soul'. On the other hand, if the question was actually put from the existentialist position, then the intent of the answer would have been quite the contrary. There is actually no way of being certain since both the

essentialist and the existentialist positions have strong advocates within the Zen School to which Jossu belonged. Whose side was he on? The question, or koan, can be used by either faction to further its argument since it works both ways round.

My impression is that the Buddha himself held the existential position, whereas a great many of his followers in later ages interpreted him as an essentialist. This may well have been the fate of many religious innovators. The Buddha was a rebel against the arch essentialist creed of the country he lived in. In fact, the Buddha's position can be seen as even more radical than that of Sartre. In order to explain this, we need some more terminology. I shall, therefore, go over into Sanskrit. In Sanskrit, existence is *asti*. Existentialism, then, would be *astivada*. Essence is *atma*. Essentialism would be *atmavada*. However, these two are not the only possibilities. All this discussion rests upon the distinction between essence and existence, noumenon and phenomenon, *atma* and *asti*. Once this distinction has been made, there are actually four possible philosophical positions. The two we have considered so far retain both *asti* and *atma*, but give them different priority. Existentialism asserts that existence is prior to essence. Essentialism the converse. The two other possibilities, however, are that only essence actually is, or that only existence actually is. In Sanskrit these would be *atma-matra* and *asti-matra* respectively.

The dominant system of thought in the India of Buddha's time was an *atma-matra*. Essences were considered the only reality. Existence was illusion, or *maya*. The aim of life was to penetrate

the veil of maya and reach the truth of atma. This was the view that the Buddha rejected. One of the most succinct statements of the Buddha's position is "sarva dharma an-atma". This statement occupies the same key definitional position in Buddhism as Sartre's 'existence precedes essence' does in existentialism. 'Sarva dharma an-atma' can be translated as 'all existences are without essence'. This is tantamount to saying only existence is, or, essence is illusion. In other words, the Buddha's position was more than astivada, it was astimatra.

People who like the essentialist position fear that if you take the idea of essence away, life will become meaningless and, therefore, directionless. A follower of astimatra would have to show that there is something within existence itself that gives life direction. This is what the Buddha did by setting forth what he called the Four Noble Truths. The first is the existence of affliction. The second is the existence of passion arising in relation to affliction. These two, the Buddha would argue, give life direction, without any need to allude to essences, which are, he would assert, merely constructions of the mind.

The third noble truth is that affliction and passion can be mastered. The fourth is the existence of the possibility of a noble way of life for those who do master them. These four things all exist, the Buddha would say. All beings are afflicted. All experience passion. All work with that passion. All thereby create a life-path. These things are all in existence and do not require us to resort to ideas about essence. This argument is similar to that of Sartre, but arguably more radical.

Down the years, Buddhism often lost touch with the radically existential position of its founder. It compromised with the essentialist doctrines of the ambient culture. In China, concepts like Buddha nature, that are amenable to an existentialist interpretation,

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nonetheless actually became vehicles for reintroducing the essentialist position. Nowadays it is not uncommon to find supposedly Buddhist teachers advancing such ideas as that everything that exists is merely 'projection of mind', a thorough going essentialist, even atma-matra, position.

Similar reversals are common in other philosophical systems. Carl Rogers was a psychologist who was somewhat influenced by existentialism. He spoke of a self-actualising tendency in rather the same way as Sartre asserted the need for human beings to seek authenticity and create essence on the basis of what they find given in existence. The self-actualising tendency has, however, in the hands of many of Rogers' disciples, become an essence of the person, a quasi-soul. It has

stopped being a tendency, a becoming, and transformed into an entity, a being. Perhaps this tendency is general. Founders of great systems of thought and practice often are so because they have themselves come very close to existence itself and have learnt the art of dropping the comforting concepts of eternalism. This may, however, be rather too strong a medicine, too frightening a path, for those who come after.

What of humanism as a whole? There are both positions represented within it. The same is true in the area that is now called spirituality.

Essentialists tend to assume that everybody is an essentialist. Hence you hear such statements as, 'We all believe in God, the Tao, Buddha

nature... or whatever you want to call it, don't we? We just call it by different names.' The Buddha would have dissented from this position, as would Sartre. Humanism can be an attempt to explore the facticity of being human and the commitments that life itself presents us with the opportunity for. Humanism can also be an attempt to assert the primacy of the self and its needs over reality. The essentialist will argue that enlightenment is a matter of penetrating to the under-lying reality, the divine, the essence of mind, or whatever. The existentialist will argue that enlightenment is a matter of jettisoning precisely those ideas and being willing to encounter life naked and without any possibility of escape. The debate will go on.

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