

Existentialism

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Caught between alternative moral positions, how does a thinking person determine what to do?

Of course, your average person cares more about drink, sex, and sport and couldn't care less about value thinking. For those of us who do, however, the process of self-analysis constantly forces us to examine. If you were a philosopher you would want to think the process through rationally. If you follow, a religion the answer should be simple: Do as you are told. Except that in both rational and non-rational cases there are alternatives within the very structures you chose. Every religion, indeed every movement, has its extremes and variants in both directions. The challenge is to decide where one stands on the spectrum and which of the alternative approaches, rational or non-rational, one feels more comfortable with. And I am a firm believer in choice!

Variations existed and continue to exist in Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Over time the pendulum swings from one approach to the other and back, from one thinker, exponent, or sect in fashion to another.

We are currently in the midst of an important paradigm shift. On the one hand the rational and scientific, on the other the mystical and emotional. For some the material is the only one that counts. For others logic is anathema. The sad fact is that most people think they have to chose one or the other. And there is another contrast, that of strictness and insularity (although the two do not necessarily always go together) as opposed to leniency and universality. All these different positions tug at our consciences, if we have them.

The Renaissance introduced the idea of humanism into the Western world. The idea that instead of the Church or religious authority deciding for you what to do and think, human beings should be able to decide for themselves. Initially humanism was seen as being anti-religious for challenging its authority. Slowly it began to morph into the assertion of human responsibility for uneasy coexistence alongside the old.

The pendulum began to swing during the nineteenth century. Science undermined the idea of anything special about human beings. We were just sophisticated animals. Marxism undermined our ideas of how a state should act. Freud told us how unaware we really were of our own minds. And nationalism taught us that nations mattered more than individuals.

Philosophy too went through fundamental changes. The great theoretical thought systems of Spinoza, Hegel, and Kant (attempts to explain it ALL, to find THE solution) were challenged by the empirical ideas of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume. It seemed that the world of thought was divided between abstract continental thought and practical Anglo-Saxon realism.

The twentieth century introduced two important philosophical movements that opened up new vistas for the thinking person. The catalyst for innovation was the culture of the German speaking peoples. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was the genius of Linguistic Analysis. Born in Vienna, he argued that philosophers had become preoccupied with theories rather than the meanings of the words we use to explain them. Whether in a religious or secular context, words and terms like God or Society, Good or Evil can signify different things to different people. How could one have a debate if one could not agree on what exactly one was talking about? WE are still arguing about what we mean by "belief" or "faith." Besides, words do not have meanings. They have uses and usages may vary and be beyond definition or category. For instance, what do we mean when we say something is a game?

In Vienna the Logical Positivists thought that sentences and statements that could not be verified were "meaningless." This consigned all talk about emotions, mysticism, and abstraction into meaningless statements. The realization that thought and language were inevitably interconnected led to Moral Relativism; that anything could be right or wrong depending entirely on how I or you might decide.

Parallel with this stream of philosophical development, the European continent gave birth to another—that of Phenomenalism, and through it, Existentialism. Starting with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) Phenomenalism focused on the individual and how he or she experiences the universe. We only know for certainty what we experience ourselves. We extrapolate and assume that others feel and think the same way. Such a personalized way of looking at the world left it open to distortions.

Jean Paul Sartre, a brilliant, complicated French thinker together with Simone De Beauvoir were regarded as the prime movers of Existentialism and a tradition of disregarding and rebelling against authority. Sartre flirted with Communism, but eventually repudiated it. He was also a staunch defender of Jews (see his [Anti-Semite and Jew](#), 1948). His philosophy inspired a whole generation to justify personal self-expression and attack convention and expectations. Of course, such idealism conflicts with many of the norms societies impose simply to protect one person from another. Nevertheless, it offered an alternative to overarching grand theories of how people ought to behave.

This dichotomy between systems or norms of different kinds and individuality is now the ideological battleground of the world we live in in the twenty-first century. We are caught between those who want to impose their orthodoxies on us (right or left) and those who want complete freedom from almost any limitation.

Those of us who love religion (with qualification), struggle to hold the middle ground between the extremes. Yet in Judaism today this is the very core existential struggle. Here, of course, existentialism has another meaning—that of survival, existence of a people, as opposed to the validation of one's own private freedoms and experiences.

In ultra-Orthodoxy (and ultra-nationalism) total obedience is required. Knee-

jerk acceptance of nostra with no questions. In reform movements, autonomy, the right to choose, is the password. Anything one doesn't find convenient one can jettison. For people like me, a balance between them is the Golden Mean. I would argue it always was.

I fear intellectual inflexibility wherever it is found. I accuse the vast majority of the thinkers of Western Civilization as being inflexible and doctrinaire, too. Just look at academic life.

I claim that religion has no business giving absolute and definitive answers to abstract issues. It can posit what it sees as crucial. But many of such points are simply not open to debate. The role of religion is to recognize a spiritual dimension which is not subject to material, scientific enquiry. That is why philosophy has never challenged my religious faith. However religion does try to provide a way of life, a framework for living that recognizes obligations, patterns of behavior, and physical boundaries. To do, more than to theorize.

As the Mishna says, "It is not the mental activity that counts, but behavior." And, "Do not (spend your time) asking what is above and below, behind and ahead." It's the present and how we deal with it that is the challenge.

I appreciate Existentialism for its validation of individuality and I value religion teaching us how to live and cope.

(If you are interested in exploring existentialism in a not too heavy way, I heartily recommend [*At the Existentialist Café*](#) by Sarah Bakewell.)