

A History of Philosophy

67 Introduction to Existentialism

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And then about some difficulties with pragmatism. Richard Bernstein, who is at Haverford College, used to teach at Yale. Richard Bernstein has written quite a lot on pragmatism, and trying to adopt pragmatist emphases in his own thinking, and in doing so has listed five contributions of pragmatism.

Now, I take it these are contributions to his own thinking. You may not think of them as contributions, all of them, but some of them at least. The first is its rejection of foundationalism, and you're noticing how that theme keeps recurring.

It'll be in the existential tradition as well, of course. The rejection of foundationalism, that tradition that comes down to us from Descartes, of trying to logically deduce everything else from certain indubitable foundations. The second contribution is fallibilism.

Fallibilism is the view that all human judgments are fallible, so that there is no logically indubitable certainty. And, of course, that's part of the rejection of foundationalism. But, of course, the pragmatist, accepting fallibilism, thinks that the pragmatic approach is a self-corrective process, because the active implementation and experimentation with an idea, like a hypothesis, is obviously going to be a corrective on premature over assurance, dogmatism, and so forth.

The third contribution he lists is the social character of the self. That is to say, breaking with the isolated atomistic view of an individual. Robinson Crusoe theory.

And seeing the self rather as a locus within a whole complex of social relationships. This is particularly evident in Dewey. And I think it's understandable that in any Hegelian-influenced movement, you'll find this kind of renewed attempt to spell out the notion that we are social beings rather than isolated individuals.

The atomism of the 18th century is rejected by virtue of the Hegelian kind of emergence of an individual in the course of history. If you like, going back to Hegel's conception of the concrete universal, the individual is the historical realization of universal possibilities from the past. So that universality and particularity combine in the individual.

Remember Hegel's thesis, antithesis, synthesis of universal, particular, individual. And inasmuch as these universal possibilities are relationships to other humans within society, then the individual is that way. Just as a problem situation is not

something isolated, but is posed by the whole network of relationships within which we exist.

Biological relationships, psychological, sociological, environmental, and so on and so forth. So that conception is significant. And tied to that, number four, is the contingency in human life and human nature.

Not only is life itself contingent on all sorts of things, but what I am as an individual is contingent on all sorts of things, genetic and environmental. And the same is true of human nature generically by virtue of Dewey's evolutionary naturalism, contingent on that evolutionary past. And then Bernstein's fifth contribution of pragmatism is its acceptance of pluralism.

Philosophical pluralism, ethical pluralism, and religious pluralism, which is a phrase a lot of you are well familiar with after the conference last week. That is to say, an acceptance of the fact that a variety of different viewpoints coexist, among which it is impossible to choose with any kind of logical certainty. And so there's a relativism about alternative positions.

Except insofar as a belief is experientially verified. But of course, keep in mind that even experimental verification does not conclusively validate a position. Simply because a pragmatic test commits the fallacy of affirming the consequent.

You're familiar with that if in a hypothetical syllogism you're saying if A then B. And you say yes, B is correct, therefore A. You're affirming the consequent, which logically is fallacious. If it rains, I shall get wet. I'm getting wet, so it's raining.

Not at all. Somebody could have turned the hose on me. All sorts of other ways of getting wet.

So that the pragmatic test operating this way may establish some, if you like, probability that A is true in a traditional sense of true. But certainly no certainty. But then the pragmatist is not interested in certainty, and he's not interested in the traditional sense of true.

So that contingency inevitably remains, and the pluralism remains. Well, this is saying that pragmatism is a kind of postmodernism. It's a kind of anti-realism.

And certainly that's the direction in which it has subsequently been taken. I mentioned Richard Rorty, for instance, last time. And he is, I suppose, the anti-realist par excellence in contemporary thought.

So these things. Bernstein's prepared to accept them all. I guess I'm prepared to buy the first three and a half, four of them.

Rejection of foundationalism, fallibilism, the social character of the self, the contingency of human life, and so forth. My difficulties with pragmatism stem, of course, from its philosophical naturalism. From the underlying naturalism.

By virtue of which, there is no intrinsic value to anything that exists. This, of course, is one of the accompaniments of philosophical naturalism, unavoidably. The locus of value, of course, is likely to be what the individual values.

And Dewey is explicit about that. He refuses to talk about what is valuable. That implies intrinsic value.

And only talks of what is valued. So that loss of intrinsic value is a concern. If there are no intrinsic values.

No, take it back. If there are intrinsic values, then obviously pragmatism, which is only concerned with relative values, is not enough. And the relationship between theory and practice is going to be a lot more than pragmatic.

Because of the intrinsic value. But that leads to the second difficulty, that pragmatism is not only rejecting intrinsic values, but is accepting only the situational value of a belief or idea. So that every situation can be different.

As if life is made up of a whole lot of discrete situations. Each is different from the other. It's a kind of atomism of its own.

And as such, I think, it fails to see the orderedness that there is in human existence. That is to say, there are universal kinds of situations. Universal kinds of desire.

Therefore, universal kinds of values. Interrelated within the unity of the whole. My complaint is that Dewey doesn't have enough interrelatedness.

This is one of the consequences of naturalism. But if there are universal types of problem situations, universal human needs, values, then this indicates something of a teleology that runs throughout human existence and nature. Such as would imply that we have not just isolated problem situations, but an overall situation.

The overall project of life has to be addressed. The meaning of life in total, its purpose. Not just what is desired in particular situations.

So it seems to me the crux of the thing is the fact that naturalism denies intrinsic values. But once you get intrinsic values in an interrelated whole, you have a logos structure and a teleology. Which is going to push you a lot beyond what a pragmatic method can accomplish.

But let that be said in the context of certain appreciations. One other thing that I've long appreciated about pragmatism is its recognition of the intrinsic connection between theory and practice. The tendency in Enlightenment thought is to think of theory for understanding's sake alone.

And if there happens to be some application, well and good. Whereas I think one of the things I've learned from Dewey is that theoretical inquiry has as its natural stimulus, its natural habitat, if you like, life itself. So that the theoretical movement of thought is aroused by things that occur in the course of life.

And as a result, we find ourselves standing back to try to understand what's going on. And the intellectual curiosity continues for largely theoretical reasons as well as practical reasons. But there is always the feedback loop of practice into theory and theory into practice.

And I think that's well demonstrated by the history of philosophy. Where you can see the relationship between crucial issues of the time and theoretical developments. As well in the stimulus of the theoretical direction as in the feeding back of the theory into the practice.

So I find Dewey helpful in that regard. Keeping philosophy in the life context. I see heads nodding as I say that.

I see some eyes lighting up. I see some smiles on Brian's face and so forth. Does anybody want to say something? No? Are you too captured by the second topic? Okay, let's move on to that.

So, the next two weeks, we're going to be dealing with existentialism and phenomenology. Now, don't confuse the two. We met the term phenomenology in reference to Hegel.

And we should therefore remember that phenomenology is a method, not a position. It's a descriptive method rather than a philosophical theory. However, it's a descriptive method that was adapted and used by some of the 20th-century existentialists.

So our introduction to existentialism is going to have to be in terms of the 19th-century roots in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Both of whom are included in the Gardner anthology. And both of whom you're going to be reading this week, are you not? I was wondering whether I asked you to do thesis statements.

And in the light of all the reading I'm going to have to do, I've just spent eight hours reading examinations for my other course. And now I'm going to have to read these

book reviews of yours this week. I decided that the quality of mercy towards myself is not strained.

Even though I'd like you to do those thesis statements. But I wouldn't impose that on myself at this juncture. So I won't do so.

But do read. You'll find them intriguing and helpful. I'll be referring to them as we go along.

Existentialism was a largely European philosophy. And I say was. Because it really was a philosophical movement that blossomed in the first half of the 20th century.

And in many ways is now passé. I'm inclined to look upon the activist sixties as marking the end of existentialism. You see, if the pessimistic existentialist was saying life is meaningless, it has no purpose, the sixties had too many meanings and purposes.

And so it seems to me that there was a phase-out in that context. It's not been recovered. Existentialism is not primarily, however, a theoretical position, a theory, a set of doctrines.

It's not primarily a school of thought. It's more a focus of attention, of concern. A focus, that is to say, on human existence.

Not on the essence of human nature. Now, that would be essentialism, not existentialism. It's not a focus on essence.

But on existence. On the problem of human existence as we experience it. And so some of the phrases we've been meeting in Whitehead and Dewey are very appropriate.

Concrete experience. Not that abstractive kind of experience that John Locke talked about, but a concrete experience. And the idea of the self-consciousness being the lens through which everything else is viewed.

Very appropriate. Because it's a self-conscious existence. The consciousness of existing in this kind of world.

That's what the existentialist is concerned about. Existence that can be meaningless or inauthentic. And the question is, how can it be authentic? How can it give meaning? Or how can we give it meaning? So, I think you can think of this existential focus as a philosophy of human existence.

Philosophizing about human existence. Human existence in a broken world. What does it feel like? To live self-consciously, inwardly, in this kind of world.

Waste places. T.S. Eliot. And it's that self-consciousness of living in such a world is the thing.

Maybe it's too common an experience these days to be peculiar. But do you ever feel self-conscious in front of the camera? I've gotten over being self-conscious in front of that thing. I just ignore it.

Except now when I'm talking to it. But self-consciousness in the face of one's own dying. Yeah.

Yeah. I remember when we buried my father-in-law. I looked down into the dark hole after the casket was lowered and said to myself, Well, next it's me.

My generation. You see. Now, it's that sort of self-consciousness which is not just an awareness.

But an emotion-loaded awareness. You see. There's no self-conscious human existence that doesn't come loaded with feeling or anxiety.

Or some other quality of that sort. What we nowadays call existential qualities of human existence. And so you find in the headings of the Kierkegaard selections words like dread, anxiety, and melancholy.

You see. Because these are the qualities of our self-conscious being. Now, what this implies is that humans are not primarily rational animals ruled by reason.

That enlightenment vision is God. We're not romantic creatures living in a romanticized kind of realm. Everything in the garden rosy.

No, romanticism is gone. If you like, existentialism is romanticism turned sour. The pumpkin rotted.

You see. Now, what's Cinderella going to do? And this feeling is augmented in technological society. I'm not sure that existentialism would ever have arisen before the Industrial Revolution.

But in an industrialized technological society, there are themes like dehumanization. Alienation. Yeah, that was a theme in Marx.

Well, he and Kierkegaard were contemporaries. Seeing different dimensions and the same problems. Alienation.

Ambiguity. Meaninglessness. Because a self-conscious existence in industrialized society with everything pressing in upon us is a world of fact without value, of existence without meaning, existence without essence.

As Sartre puts it. And one German writer of this period, more a phenomenologist than an existentialist, Max Scheler, puts it this way. We are the first generation in which man has become fully and thoroughly problematic to himself.

In which he no longer knows what he essentially is. But at the same time knows that he doesn't know. Yet desperately wants to.

Get the picture? Now, it's in that sort of situation. The anguished self-consciousness of living in a broken world. It's in that sort of situation.

The approach of the existentialist is not going to offer a theory. You don't offer a theory to resolve existential anxiety. Any more than you use a hammer to wash your face.

It's the wrong tool. The existentialist is not trying to refute an opponent by appeal to some universal norms of reason. No.

He's not trying to define the universal essence of human nature. As in the Aristotelian or Thomistic tradition. And certainly not trying to achieve some objective detachment from the whole business.

You see. No, rather, he's trying to describe the predicament in an illuminating way. To describe and illuminate the situation.

The mess in which we find ourselves. Trying, if you like, to uncover what it is that we dread. So, trying to describe these existential characteristics of individual existence.

The concern. The emphasis is upon the individual as a subject who consciously feels her existence. You see.

A subject with all of the inwardness that accompanies I, the subject. You see. Even Jerry Brown's *We the People* is too objective and impersonal.

Because we don't have an inwardness, a feeling of this sort. It's the individual I. So a descriptive task. And in this, I think it's fair to say that existentialism is influenced in its beginnings in the 19th century.

Is influenced very plainly by Kant and by Hegel. Neither of whom was an existentialist. But without whom, I think it's fair to say, there would never have been existentialism, at least not in any form that we know.

There may have been earlier existential motifs in earlier thinkers. Augustine. Pascal.

But not the existentialism we know. Kant's influence? Yeah, Kant's Copernican Revolution. Which, as you recall, was moved from the view that we are objective, detached observers of a world and conform ourselves, our thinking, to what the world is.

Moving from that, the revolution, moving from that to the view that the world is going to be conformed to us, to what we are, bring inwardly. And so it is the Kantian emphasis on the transcendental self, the transcendental ego that is uncovered. That is presupposed in the forms of intuition and the categories of understanding.

You see. This self brings its own structures and meanings to the world. Now that sort of theme is running throughout the existentialists.

So, Kant's influence there. Hegel's influence. Yeah, the dialectic.

The dialectic of an unfolding self-consciousness. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis. The synthesis becomes a thesis for a new antithesis.

You see, this unfolding of the self-consciousness. Now, admittedly, Hegel had used this dialectic in moving from one essence to another essence and so on and so forth. It's a theoretical dialectic.

For Kierkegaard, it's an existential dialectic. You see, in the concreteness of our feelings, we move from thesis to antithesis and synthesis. Unless, in the final analysis, as with Sartre, there's no final synthesis.

Which is why Sartre is the pessimist he is. So that when you read Sartre's *Transcendence of the Ego* next week, what you'll be finding is the act of being self-conscious in any kind of world. Not just creating meaning, but creating itself.

So that you and I are big nothings. And we create ourselves, as it were, afresh in every act of thinking, seeing, participating, and so forth. Well, and this is a dialectical process.

Well, you'll find that Kant's description of thesis-antithesis-synthesis in terms of immediacy, mediation, immediacy, mediation, and then the next step, the synthesis, whatever that is. That immediacy, mediation, those terms are characteristic of existential writers. In addition, from Hegel, the phenomenological description.

You see, the phenomenological method. That's Hegel's. So keep in mind that servant-master dialectic.

Because that sort of dialectic of the self-consciousness is going to be common. One other theme, perhaps, from Hegel, the matter of freedom. Remember, Hegel said that the overall process of history is the absolutization of freedom.

The development of full self-consciousness is the absolutization of its freedom. Well, the existentialist forgets about any teleology in history, but finds absolutization of freedom. You see, the individual's freedom.

Not part of some absolute of a Hegelian sort, but as an individual. And as a result, the movement is, for the existentialist, from existence to essence. You see? From being, no, well, being, if that's what you mean by existence, via becoming.

You see? To another kind of being, capital B. Essence rather than existence. You'll find that in Heidegger, for instance, this mere existence is referred to as *Verhandensein*. Just being on hand like any other object.

You see, no inwardness of identity at all. *Verhandensein*. Or, if you like, as *Dasein*.

Dasein. That's there. There it is.

Merely object. As distinct from existence. Yeah, that's the meaningful thing.

Terminology varies from one to another. But the emphasis is on the process of unfolding existential self-consciousness in finding and creating authentic existence for oneself. Okay, those are the general characteristics.

Let me add this, that having said that, there are different varieties of existentialism. In which some of these characteristics are more prominent than others. There are some, for instance, who are quite irreligious.

And there are other existential thinkers who are religious. Now, obviously, Kierkegaard is one of the religious and Nietzsche is one of the irreligious. So we get our sample there.

But the other religious ones, names like Gabriel Marcel, a French Catholic writer. Who was so disgusted with another irreligious one, namely Sartre, that he refused to call himself an existentialist and coined the phrase philosophy of existence instead. Marcel.

Or Paul Tillich, the Protestant theologian. Or Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher. Whereas the irreligious down here, you've got Sartre, you've got Heidegger.

So on and so forth. Now, just that distinction tends to trigger another distinction. Because in people like Marcel and Buber, particularly, you get the realization that meaning, attending existence, is found in relationship.

It's Buber who coined, not coined but popularized, the term I-thou, hyphenated. Who says that the basic word is not I, not thou, but I-thou. And the I only has meaning as abstracted from the relationship.

But the experience of we-ness is prior to the experience of the solitary I. And I think in young children that's obviously so. And with Marcel, analogously. And of course, in Kierkegaard, authentic existence is gained in relationship to God.

So there's no authenticity alone. And it's not surprising then that somebody like Sartre, who tends to see relationships as masochistic or sadistic and as irreligious, ends up saying there's no meaning to it all. Yeah, in his big work, *Being and Nothingness*.

He has no discussion of love. No, he has a discussion of sexuality, but it's all about masochism and sadism. No positive, nurturing kind of relationship involved.

And the reason for that? Well, his phenomenology begins to explain it, describe it. The explanation, ultimately, I think, is two-fold. One, biographical.

His autobiography, a thing called *Words*, is quite revealing. But other than that is the fact that in Sartre, there's a dialectic that goes on between what he calls *l'angoisse* and *le poursoir*. *L'angoisse* is simply what is in itself.

Le poursoir is what it is for itself. Now, does that echo a Kant? The thing in itself, the thing for me? It's Kantian language. The thing is that the self-conscious individual is concerned with, yes, the world as it is for me.

Yes. And is blocked all the time by the intransigence of the world as it is in itself. How many of you have read Sartre's play *No Exit*? Okay, half a dozen of you maybe.

Do it, the rest of you. I was going to say bums. Do it! My goodness, what have you been doing with yourself all your lives? You'll read it in an hour, if you can stand it.

But you see, it's a picture of three individuals, two women and a man, in a room from which there's no exit. Oh, it turns out there's a door that's open. They just can't bring themselves to leave.

It's a dramatic setting of hell. This is the afterlife. They're living with their pasts.

And here they have to put up with each other. They try to make up to each other. And as two of them seem to be doing pretty well, well, either the third one breaks it up, or else one of them does something which destroys any possible relationship.

And you get a dramatic picture of this, the individual who wants this other one for self, being negated by the other, which is what it is in itself. Do you see? Until, at the end of the play, you get the line, Hell is other people. All right, let's get on with it.

End of play. The antithesis without a synthesis. The antithesis of L'Ansoir L'Apursoir without a synthesis.

And that stands in marked contrast to Marcel, who has a play with another threesome in it, a play called The Man of God. A Protestant pastor in France whose relationship with his wife leaves something to be desired, and whose daughter is about to run away from home. Get the picture? And just as the crisis seemed to be about to burst, a knock on the door brings in one of the parishioners with her baby, desperately wanting the pastor's help.

So he tends to the parishioner. And then when he comes back to the others, he says, they all say, Well, now it's for people like that that we have to live. I just said that Marcel is repudiating Saint.

I think Man of God is a conscious repudiation of No Exit. Where, instead of L'Apursoir wanting for myself, there's a notion of giving of oneself, which is the basis for a meaningful relationship. So it's an interesting contrast then between these two groups.

All right. Let's say a few things about Kierkegaard. Oh, incidentally, one of the religious types is a Russian Orthodox, Nicholas Bajaev.

So you get a variety of Judeo-Christian traditions in there. All right. Kierkegaard, a mid-19th-century Danish thinker, was educated in Germany during the time of Hegel.

And I think it's fair to say that the central theme in Kierkegaard, which in a way sets the pace for later existentialism, is the theme of becoming a person. Which, for Kierkegaard, is becoming a Christian. But this is, of course, the question: what is it to be a person in this kind of world? And you find Kierkegaard criticizing the inadequacies of both the Enlightenment account of a person and the Romanticist account of things.

Enlightenment and Romanticism are neither sufficient. We're not rational animals; we're not primarily related to external things. We're not filled with creative spirit, that's just wonderful.

No, those images are dead, false optimisms. Rather, he talks about two paths to becoming a Christian. And this is most systematically developed in his work called *A Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

A little bit of his famous irony in that title. It's about 400 pages, hardly a postscript. Unscientific, to say the least.

You know, what existentialists would draw on 18th-century, 19th-century science anyway. What would it enlighten? So forth. But the two paths to becoming a Christian that he talks about are the objective and the subjective paths.

You see? Now the objective path is the path of natural theology. Or the path of historical evidence. And his complaint about that is, it's various.

One is the indecisiveness of the rational. Because you know the way it is with arguments and evidence. There are counter-arguments.

So you always have to respond to the counter-argument. And then there's an argument to the counter-argument, and you have to respond to that counter-argument to the counter-argument. And then there's a counter-argument, you're counter to the counter to the counter-argument.

And so on and so forth. And there's always something else that has to be done. It reminds me of a friend of mine who, back in the 50s, was going to write a little book on a certain topic.

And he kept saying, well, there's something else coming out, another article in a journal I haven't looked at. And so he postponed it till that. It's now 92.

He's retired, and the book never was written, you see. Yeah. Well, Kierkegaard sees that, you see.

That's the tendency of the Germanic scholar, 19th-century German scholarship. You know, you remember that three-volume German introduction to *The Elephant*, remember? So, that objective path leads really nowhere. It's never finished.

And says Kierkegaard, this is because, one, it lacks any absolute starting point, direct reference to Descartes, you see. And, because its logic is able to deal with universal concepts, but not with individual existence. Remember that deductive logic has to

have a term universally distributed at least once in a syllogism if there's going to be any logical connection between the premises.

So, traditional logic is not a logic of the individual, the unique individual, the unique situation. But in addition, the objective path cheats us out of the passion. Oh, yes, cool, calm, enlightened reason, you know, cheats us out of the passion which alone provides impetus to faith and love and hope.

So, you'll find on 297, for instance, a passage in which Kierkegaard makes the point that a logical system is possible. Sure, lots of logical systems are possible. A lot of them all, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, Descartes.

A logical system is possible, but an existential system is impossible, you see, because its universal truths can't catch that slippery eel of individual existence. Now, on the other hand, the subjective path is a different matter because the subjective path, the inwardness, responds passionately and responds passionately to God in Christ confronting us. That is to say that while the objective path will say, well, I cannot prove the existence of God, or I cannot prove the incarnation, or the objective path will say, well, there seems to be something paradoxical here about the eternal being in time.

How can that be? You'll see. The subjective path just responds with passion of faith and grateful love. You'll see.

And that's what becoming a Christian is. Now, notice these terms. There are places where he talks of truth as subjective.

Now, be careful of that. He does not mean that it's just in your mind and nowhere else, that the pop use of the subjective. He does not mean it's relative.

Because he uses the terms objective and subjective as ways of describing one's relationship to God or to the truth. You'll see. Or more specifically, he uses objective for describing your rational relationship to the truth, detached, measuring how far you have yet to go, and so forth.

And he uses the word "subjective" for talking about a relationship, not to the truth, but to God himself. Focus here on the personal relationship, whereas here it's on the logic of natural theology. You see the difference? Well, how many of you have Gardner with you? Boy Scout motto, be prepared.

Okay, you'll have to have me read to you. So I read to you from page 302. And you can reread it yourself to get it more forcefully.

302. When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth as an object to which the knower is related. It's focused on the question of whether it is the truth.

If only the object to which he's related is the truth, the subject is accounted to be in the truth. But when the question of truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively, that is to say, with all the inwardness of our being, to the nature of the individual's relationship. And if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be related to what is not true.

In other words, you might misunderstand some things and be wrong. But a subjective relationship can still be there. So he talks then of the objective and the subjective paths.

And points out that the objective accents what is said. The subjective accents how it is said. Now think of two ways you could recite the Apostles' Creed.

I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and so forth. Now the objective recites, I believe that all these propositions are true. The subjective says, Lord, I believe.

With all my heart, I believe. So he has this definition of truth conceived in this subjective way as an objective uncertainty. Sure, you haven't got it logically proven with complete certainty.

It's against foundationalism. An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness. Now that's the highest truth attainable for an existing individual.

It's as if his text is the man in the Gospels who said, Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief. That is to say, my not having logical certainty, that's one thing. But passionately, I believe.

Now, what most of the other stuff that Kierkegaard does is reflection on this. What is this passionate relationship? How are we going to describe that phenomenologically? And that's what we'll have to look at next time. It involves conceptions like faith, love, melancholy, dread, sickness under death, etc., etc.

So we'll pick it up there on Wednesday.