

Ethan Le

Professor Uffelman

Introduction to Philosophy

10 April 2021

The Meaning of Life

Is life meaningful? Many philosophers have tried to unearth an explanation to this question since the dawn of philosophy. However, one of the most common approaches to the question—one of the most understandable—is the view of existentialism—the view of which an individual has freedom over his or her choices, a willful testament to crafting one's own destiny. There are many kinds under the category itself, but essentially, there are two primary perspectives that many philosophers make agreements for and arguments against, theistic existentialism and atheistic existentialism. The theistic view explains that God—an eternal being—places a meaning into the human existence, a priori purpose injecting into life—resulting in a more objective perspective; however, the view of an atheistic existentialist seems to drive many closer to the answer. An atheistic existentialist looks at life subjectively, stating that human beings make meaning internally to life through one's actions and behaviors. One of the philosophers, Jean-Paul Sartre, dives in depth on the subject through his lecture *Existentialism is Humanism*, arguing for an atheistic perspective being a better choice to examine life as a whole. Throughout his lecture, Sartre explains that a human is in full control of himself, making choices that would either enlighten him or despairs him; regardless, man is in control of his life. In of it all, Sartre's central message to takeaway is “existence precedes essence.” The atheistic view of existentialism uses the subjective meaning framework to better explain the meaning of one's life

since man has freedom to control his own destiny—adding his own meaning to his life, but first he has to exist with or without God; thus, Sartre’s arguments for atheistic existentialism speaks truth about the human existence, or the human condition—existence precedes essence.

With man given no purpose before his existence, there are no supernatural forces—God in particular—grants man his own meaning; it is through his choices and behaviors. Through Sartre’s arguments for atheistic existentialism, religion has no stand in crafting meaning for human kind. Sartre himself even promotes the idea of abandonment—an expression that states that human beings bear full consequences of his or her choices without a reliance on supernatural forces. During Sartre’s speech on “abandonment,” he promptly expresses, “[Existentialists] think that man interprets the [given] signs as he pleases and that man is therefore without any support or help, condemned at all times to invent man” (Sartre 29). According to Sartre, he argues that there is no a priori knowledge attached to any meaningful signs, but rather, man “interprets” these signs the way that he chooses; thus, Sartre brings back to the point that man bears meaning out of his existence, subjectively. Man’s meaningful interpretation is through the usage of his experience and perception—using it with or without the acknowledgement of a supernatural being. There might be some universal meaning that all men understand, but ultimately, through an existentialist’s standpoint, all meanings are internalized differently, leaving man “condemned” to be free and abandoned—enforcing the maxim “existence precedes essence.” Additionally, in the essay “Implications of Sartre’s Humanistic Existentialism,” the author, Emmanuel Jerome Udokang, explains further about Sartre’s implication about God and human nature. Overviewing his excavation of Sartre’s humanistic existentialism, Udokang simply notes, “God has not defined it for man, it is man who defines it for himself ... his life is his own creation” (Udokang). Man is in control of his own life, creating

subjective meaning to himself without any help. In doing so, meaning is rather internalized within man, so are values and beliefs, making his existence contain essence; the meaning of life therefore commences after man's existence. The entirety of man's essence is composed of his experiences that are independent from a supernatural deity; therefore, his meaning of life rises from his own subjectivism. God, or any supernatural being, remains unattached to any individual since man himself is "his own creation." Ultimately, human creates the meaning that he or she perceives through the given signs of life; the feeling of abandonment plays well into subjectivism of existentialism, being the idea of supernatural forces have to attachment on any individual; thus, man is free to make his choices to make sense of his meaning in life.

Another factor that rests well with the subjectivity of atheistic existentialism is the strong mentality of free will against determinism. Since humans are meant to feel abandonment towards his or her choices, determinism has no part in any individual life; it is free will that dictates a person's purpose and meaning. When discussing about example of heroes and cowards that tie directly to determinism, Sartre smartly expresses, "What the existentialist says is that the coward makes himself cowardly and the hero makes himself heroic; there is always the possibility that one day the coward may longer be cowardly and the hero may cease to be a hero" (Sartre 39). The concept of determinism evaporates in Sartre's speech; he emphasizes on the powerful notion of the freedom of choice. Sartre transcends the ideology of humans to inherit nothing but an existence in the universe. Thus, there is no past or future at birth; however, an individual's present determines his or her identity or essence through choices and behaviors—all nurture factors. A hero can turn villainous or cowardly through the course of his actions despite being born into a heroic family. The generic factors might imprint the physical form of the hero, but inheritably, no purpose or meaning is passed down to the offspring, just an existence. Man must

make meaning through his action, and being brought up from a heroic family does not conclude that youngling grows up to be the hero. On the contrary, the hero can step into the evil side of society, and turns himself into a villain or a coward. All is relative to his freedom of choice; subjectivism will ultimately shape the meaning of the individual, adding essence into his identity. Furthermore, the issue of individual's freedom to choose strengthens the tie between free will and the essence of an individual in the examination of "Existentialism and Humanism: Humanity-Know Thyself!" The author, Nigel Tubbs, lays out Sartre's humanistic points about existentialism, especially about its subjectivity about defining the meaning of life—one's essence. Tubbs displays Sartre's strong argument against universal human nature—which there is none since there is no prior knowledge or God to determine one's purpose. It is essential to Sartre's existentialism that the maxim "existence precedes essence" persists against any counter arguments; subjectivity helps man define man as he creates meaning for himself based on his own beliefs and values. Following Tubb's explanation in his analysis, he states, "The will of man, what he makes and defines himself to be, comes 'as he conceives himself after already existing'" (Tubbs 481). Before man's essence is discovered, man contains nothingness until he or she finds the meaning through his or her choices. His will to choose at the time gives his life meaning, pushing for the agenda of freedom since man is freedom. Again, determinism has no value in determining meaning for man since man makes up his own meaning and essence. Subjectivism factors into man's free will in ways that man defines himself through his own eyes and perception; no other people or deity say who he is, only himself. Man conceives his own meaning after "already existing" in the world; in a way, atheistic existentialism acts as a path towards practicing post-priori knowledge—a knowledge acquired through experience. Thus, free will helps man crafts the subjective meaning through his experiences and choices.

Lastly, in order for Sartre's maxim to spark truthfulness, meaning has to come from commitment, or the will, an individual has on every choice—a choice that man has no way of avoiding and bears full responsibility for it. According to Sartre, man has always been in a situation where he has to choose; the options are limited, but a choice is always made with commitment and will. Subjectively, meaning submerges from those choices, crafting a discovery about himself—a discovered essence per se. In a sense, man has to commit to his choices since man is constantly making alternatives to his life. As Sartre disregards the capriciousness in an individual's choices, he explains, "Our view, on the other hand, is that man finds himself in a complex situation in which he committed, and by his choices commits all mankind, and he cannot avoid choosing ... Whatever he does, he cannot avoid bearing full responsibility for his choices" (Sartre 45). In Sartre's mentality of existentialism, meaning exists in man's choices. Whenever he makes a choice, commitment is injected into his decision whether he is conscious of it or not. Since man is always in a situation where a solution has to be made, whatever he chooses, meaning and essence surface underneath those choices, painting a picture to a white blank piece of paper. Meaning does not exist prior to man's existence, so like an artist, there is no prompt for an artist to draw, but he has to make a choice in the moment to define what his painting would be. As the artist progresses through, every choice that he makes paints an image, or a meaning, to his life, aspiring an essence to his being. Additionally, David P. Barash, a scholar, demonstrates the freedom of man in his choice, tying back into Sartre's maxim and the humanistic perspective of it through his analysis, "Evolutionary Existentialism, Sociology, and the Meaning of Life." As Barash discourages the point of genetic influence within man—by which the genetic factors suggest what his or her meaning should be, he simply mentions, "It is our job, our responsibility, to choose whether to obey. We are terrifyingly free to make these

decisions ... so as long as our strength and determination last” (Barash 1016). In a nutshell, a human is free to make his or her own choices no matter what. Genetic characteristics may influence one’s choices, but all around, man bears full responsibility for the outcome. “Strength and determination” here address the man’s commitment and will to choose; from the decision itself, meaning is born within man. Humans are always capable of making choices for oneself, crafting meaning in a meaningless world. With man’s existence comes first, commitment and will, along with subjectivity of man, construct the true meaning for oneself—an artist has to paint along with his intuition to master his arts. Ultimately, the choices one makes always contain a will and a responsibility to yield a meaning to one’s life—a purpose to a blank existence.

Man has always been free of all constraints since there are no supernatural forces attached to man himself; in so, he utilizes subjectivism to create his own meaning of life—proving Sartre’s maxim stays true: “existence precedes essence.” With man able to choose his own path like a choose-your-own-adventure game, every decision he makes translates a meaning, an essence that shapes his identity. Like Sartre profoundly illustrates the point of meaningless in the world, man is abandoned to make his choices without excuses, without any reliance or dependence; he is condemned to be free to construct his life the way he wants it like an artist. Inevitably, man would bear the responsibility of it out of anguish since there are no external forces that he could rely on to make his decision, only him. Furthermore, man also experiences optimistic despair about his choices, knowing that there are limited possibilities—and the pondering of “what-ifs”—while choosing one path only. All of these atheistic existentialist ideas conspire subjectivism in man’s meaning of life; man is his own creation. Man’s existence is a blank sheet of paper, and his choices are the pen that is written on

those lines of meanings. Along those lines, man has no attachment to any inherited characters, but to his behaviors and sense of self. Ultimately, the meaning of life has no objectivity in reality—the world is meaningless, but the freedom of man and the powerful experience of subjectivism and post-priori persist in producing one's meaning, one's purpose to simple existence.

Work Cite

Barash, David P. "Evolutionary Existentialism, Sociobiology, and the Meaning of

Life." *BioScience*, vol. 50, no. 11, Nov. 2000, p. 1012. *EBSCOhost*,
doi:10.1641/0006-3568(2000)050[1012:EESATM]2.0.CO;2.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism is Humanism*. Yale University Press, 2007. Print.

Tubbs, Nigel. "Existentialism and Humanism: Humanity-Know Thyself!" *Studies in Philosophy
& Education*, vol. 32, no. 5, Sept. 2013, pp. 477–490. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1007/s11217-
012-9354-z.

Udokang, Emmanuel Jerome. "Implications of Sartre's humanistic existentialism." *Journal of
Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, vol. 39, no. 1-2, 2016, p. 83+. *Gale Academic
OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A473922762/AONE?u=ccmorris&sid=AONE&xid=dcf
bb0f5. Accessed 28 Apr. 2021.