

## **PHI 315 : Existence and Philosophy Nov 10**

### **General**

Today we begin a new section, but in fact our last one. In this section, unit, whatever you want to call it, I want to look the way in which science fiction helps us shed light on the human existential condition. In other words, how can science fiction, which permits us to imagine conditions other than the present ones, helps us shed light on the way in which things actually are?

Recall that science fiction is a kind of genre of work that imagines a possible world different from the actual one that we inhabit. Usually, the difference stems in some kind of scientifically grounded reason, either at the physical or technological or some other nearby level. It is close enough to our world so as to remain plausible, but far enough where the speculative scenario truly is other than the present actual scenario of our lives.

Brief example: in ‘Melancholia’, there is a planet tumbling toward Earth. It spells potential death for all. This is possible in our world too—perhaps a planet, but more likely an asteroid, could head toward our planet, and it may be so large so as to be unavoidable. What would that reveal? Certainly, prior to recent developments in tech, it was a certainty that we would all die. It still is a possibility. So, let us suppose that death awaits us all. Yet, it is not a subject we often think about. We do not spend our days thinking about death, and in so doing, we let little things get in the way, forgetting that we could die at any moment, and if we could reflect briefly on life after death, it would almost certainly seem not worth it to worry about the thing we let bother us.

So, science fiction movies that touch on our existential condition do so by using fiction as a means of revealing something non-fictional about what it means to be human, what it means to exist in the way that we do. Today, I want to look at what it means to study human existence. Next Monday we will look at the question of the good life. Finally, we will look at major questions in existentialism.

### **Human Existence and Existentialism**

I think it might be good to start with some history. Traditionally, philosophy did not pay much attention to the life of the individual. The concern was with Being, or with Epistemology, or other such questions. We have talked about Kant the question of what it means to do philosophy and ask questions of reality.

Prior to Kant, the main view in philosophy was that Truth was external. That to find it, we must make our minds conform to the world. That the meaning of life was grounded in something else. In Western religions, it is with G-d or with some afterlife, or some realm of Forms. In Eastern religions, the grounding either does not exist, since life itself is a kind of illusion, or it is still external, since say Nirvana is a state to be reached via purification through the cycles.

With Kant, we begin to think that it is the subject, you as such, that is at the core of everything else. At first it was about the world, and science, and the idea that it is we who produce knowledge in making claims about the world. That we make the world conform to our concepts by forcing things into boxes.

But this extended further, into the questions of the meaning of existence and life.

It is not that we get the roots of existentialism. Existentialism, as a distinct philosophical movement, delves deeply into the essence of human existence. It emphasizes individual freedom, choice, and subjective experience, placing the individual at the core of its analysis. This philosophy arose as a reaction against traditional philosophies that often focused on objective and abstract concepts detached from human experience.

The historical roots of existentialism can be traced to the 19th-century works of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, who challenged the systematic philosophy of Hegel and the complacency of Christian ethics of their time. Kierkegaard critiqued the prevailing philosophical systems for ignoring personal existence, while Nietzsche proclaimed the “death of God” and the necessity for individual revaluation of morals in the face of an absence of divine order.

In the 20th century, existentialism became more structured with the contributions of Martin Heidegger, who introduced a complex analysis of existence and being in his seminal work “Being and Time” (1927). Heidegger’s work shifted the focus from human existence to the question of Being itself, influencing subsequent existentialist thought.

The tumultuous events of the 20th century, especially the First and Second World Wars, influenced existentialist philosophy significantly. The sense of disorientation and the search for meaning in the wake of these wars gave existentialist ideas a potent relevance. The post-war era, in particular, saw a surge in existentialist thinking with philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who addressed the absurdity of life and the alienation of the individual, emphasizing the freedom of humans to shape their own destinies against a backdrop of inherent meaninglessness.

Sartre’s notion of “existence precedes essence” suggested that individuals are not born with a predetermined purpose; instead, they create their own meaning through their choices and actions. Camus, through works like “The Myth of Sisyphus,” grappled with the notion of the absurd — the conflict between human tendency to seek inherent value in life and the inability to find any in a purposeless, indifferent universe.

Historically, existentialism has been a movement marked by its time — a philosophical response to the crises of human experience in the modern world. It continues to influence contemporary thought, challenging individuals to confront the fundamental aspects of their existence and to live authentically in a world where traditional values and beliefs no longer provide definitive guidance.