



EXISTENTIAL HUMANISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF SARTRE AND CAMUS

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The subject of this paper is a consideration of the major philosophical issues of 20th-century existentialism, especially as they are developed in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, with particular focus upon the basic ideas of their shared existential humanism and how they differ in their views about freedom, existence and the human situation. The primary research for this study was a review of key texts of philosophy and reviews/critiques of those texts to show how the interrelated themes of humanism and existentialism were developing in post-WWII Europe. Through Sartre's concept of "radical freedom" and Camus' concept of "the absurd," this study attempts to demonstrate why existential humanism continues to be an important area of thought in understanding human existence and the search for meaning in contemporary society.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Humanism, Freedom, Absurdity, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus*

Introduction

Existentialism as an influential philosophical movement was born from the turmoil that defined twentieth century philosophy; it challenged traditional notions of existence, purpose and man's ability to be free. Existence is closely tied to the human experience in a increasingly fractured and complex world where people seek to live authentically. The existentialist paradigm combined with the humanist perspective offers substantial insight into human freedom, moral obligation and the search for purpose within an inherent absurdity of life.

In this article we will examine the contributions of two major figures in existential humanism, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Sartre's work, "Being and Nothingness," illustrates the boundaries of human freedom and accountability and emphasizes the necessity of ethics in choosing one's path through the anguish associated with existential choice. Conversely, Camus' existentialism addresses the absurdity of existence, that there is no inherent meaning or purpose in the universe. His response to this absurdity is a call to human action based upon courage and defiance, urging humans to face uncertainty without fear.

This article aims to shed light on the different aspects of existential humanism through the 20th century thought of Sartre and Camus. As we follow the intellectual journeys of both men, their thoughts continue to resonate with people today. We invite readers to engage in the deep thinking and perspectives that these philosophers have regarding existential issues of freedom, authenticity and what it means to be human in a rapidly expanding and complex global environment.

Historical Context of Existential Humanism

Existential humanism developed as an answer to both the global crises and changes that were occurring during the 20th Century. A reaction to the global wars that had devastated the planet (WWI and WWII), the creation of totalitarian governments, and the destruction they brought, existential humanism demonstrated how fragile is human life and how incapable are traditional forms of religious belief to deal with the challenges of the modern world. As the major narrative structures (religious beliefs, nationalistic ideologies) collapsed, many people were faced with finding meaning in an indifferent and chaotic world. With philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus providing existential humanism as a method for facing these existential fears, existential humanism used the ideas of reason and human dignity found in the Enlightenment to create a new, optimistic approach to human freedom, moral responsibility, and the necessity of creating one's own meaning through one's own choices and actions. Existential humanism was also reacting to the dangers of repressing individual autonomy in order to promote fascist or communist ideology; therefore, existential humanists called for human dignity and human solidarity. For those who

experienced feelings of alienation and despair in post-WWII Europe, existential humanism provided a positive way to affirm life, while avoiding the nihilism that could have otherwise been the result of those feelings. Existential humanism not only influenced academic thinking, but it also influenced literature, drama, and art; examples of this can be seen in Sartre's play "No Exit" and Camus' novel "The Plague." Those artistic representations reflected the existential struggles of their time, and provided a platform for people to express their desire for authenticity, autonomy, and ethically responsible behavior. Existential humanism continues to be relevant today, and provides answers to the questions of identity, meaning, and morally responsible behavior in today's increasingly dynamic world. By establishing its relevance to the specific time and place of its emergence, existential humanism continues to inspire individuals to confront the absurd, and to affirm the inherent dignity of human existence.

Jean-Paul Sartre: The Existentialist Humanist

Jean-Paul Sartre is a French philosopher, novelist, and dramatist who is widely regarded as a leading figure in the development of existentialism and humanism. At the core of Sartre's philosophical thought is the idea of human freedom and the responsibility that accompanies it. Sartre's existentialist humanism is based upon the notion that humans are fundamentally free and therefore can develop their essence (their sense of self) through their actions (existence precedes essence). Sartre rejects determinism and believes that individuals are not controlled by either predestined nature or a higher power, but rather, determine themselves through their decisions and commitments.

In his now classic paper, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre defends existentialism against accusations of being nihilistic and hopeless, arguing that existentialism is empowering and has placed responsibility on the individual. While Sartre argues that humans are abandoned in a universe that has no inherent meaning or purpose, humans have the ability to develop their own meanings and values. The freedom to do so, however, results in what Sartre calls "anxiety" or the "weight" of having to take complete responsibility for creating one's identity and destiny and for doing so without any external guidance or reason to excuse oneself. Ultimately, Sartre sees humanism as a way of emphasizing the value of this self-creation, because through self-creation individuals can achieve their full potential and interact with other people in a meaningful way.

A significant aspect of Sartre's existentialist humanism is the relationship between human freedom and the "Other." In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explores how humans encounter other people as at once both a source of potential objectification and as a source of possible solidarity and mutual recognition. Sartre believes that humanism is fully realized when individuals recognize and accept their commonality of freedom and interdependence, and when they choose to behave ethically not due to some obligation to an external standard, but due to genuine care and concern for all of humanity.

For Sartre, another key element of humanism is interaction, or engagement, as a primary form of humane behavior. Sartre believes that human freedom must always be exercised within the contexts of society and history and that individuals have a moral duty to resist injustice and oppression. Sartre's commitment to social justice, evident in his support of decolonization, worker's rights, and social equality, exemplifies this belief. According to Sartre, humanism is not simply a theoretical ideal, but rather a call to action rooted in the collective struggle to build a better society.

Ultimately, Sartre's existentialist humanism represents a vision of humanity that celebrates the possibilities of freedom, responsibility and solidarity among individuals. Sartre challenges individuals to face up to the consequences of their choices and to realize the potential of individuals to positively impact the world around them. Through his existentialist humanism, Sartre demonstrates that humans possess the capability to live authentic lives, strive for justice and create meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe.

Albert Camus: Absurdism and Humanistic Rebellion

Philosopher Albert Camus developed the theory of absurdism and investigated the human condition through his writings. He is best known for his theory on "the Absurd", which is based on the idea of a disparity between humans' desire to find meaning in life and the fact that there is no apparent reason for anything. Camus stated that we are living in an absurd world because the search for meaning is futile yet humans will continue to search for it. The absurd is a central theme in most of Camus's literature and philosophies.

In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus uses the myth of Sisyphus to illustrate the absurd man. Camus states that the absurd man cannot give up when faced with the meaninglessness of life, even though he knows the absurd nature of his existence. According to Camus, the absurd man accepts the absurd nature of life, therefore, he rebels against it by continuing to exist in spite of it.

The concept of revolt is one of Camus's major themes and directly related to his absurdist theories. In *The Rebel*, Camus defines revolt and rebellion. Revolt is a reaction to rebellion as it attempts to create a new society while rebellion is a reaction to injustice and absurdity. Camus views rebellion as a defense of human dignity and freedom. Rebellion is also humanistic in nature, as it values human solidarity and the knowledge of common struggles that exist among humans.

In his novel, *The Plague*, Camus explores this humanistic conflict. Set in the city of Oran during an outbreak of a devastating plague, the novel illustrates the absurdity of human suffering and the responses of people in the community. The actions of the characters, ranging from passive acceptance to violent rebellion, demonstrate the source of revolt. Dr. Rieux, the main character, exemplifies a moral and existential commitment to fight against the plague. He recognizes the value of human life and solidarity, thus fighting the plague because he understands these values.

Ultimately, Camus provided a humanistic vision that encourages people to accept the absurd nature of life and to resist it by taking courageous and responsible action to preserve the value of human freedom and dignity.

Comparative Analysis: Sartre and Camus on Existential Humanism

Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, while connected in their existentialist explorations, have divergent views regarding the interpretation of existential humanism. Their varying perspectives concerning human freedom, rebellion, and the plight of humans were formed due to differences in their views toward these concepts. Both thinkers reject the conventional philosophical systems; yet, their views of philosophy differ, as well as their responses to the questions posed by an absurd and indifferent cosmos.

Existential Humanism, according to Sartre, is based upon the idea of humans being entirely and completely free. Therefore, they are solely responsible for making decisions about how to define themselves and their own existence, as there is no inherent meaning to the world. Although this freedom is empowering, because humans can choose how to act, it is also anxiety-provoking, since humans cannot escape the responsibility for their actions. Sartre's existentialism is fundamentally optimistic, as it holds that humans can create meaning through their actions and develop mutually beneficial relationships with others through the acknowledgment of the shared human freedom. Existentialism, in general, highlights the importance of involvement in creating morally and politically better societies.

On the other hand, Camus's existential humanism focuses upon the concept of the absurd. The absurd arises from the contradiction between humanity's desire for meaning and the indifference of the universe. As opposed to Sartre, who views freedom as a means for self-creation, Camus believes that individuals must accept the absurdity of life, rather than attempting to avoid or eliminate it. Camus views revolt as a form of humanistic rebellion—specifically, a rejection of the acceptance of despair, and not an attempt to impose meaning. Camus's revolt is developed in solidarity, as is demonstrated in *The Plague*, and through the shared human experience of suffering. When people work together to resist a disease in the novel, it represents an affirmation of life and human dignity, even though the efforts are ultimately futile.

Additionally, Sartre and Camus have opposing views on the role of social action and politics. Since Sartre's existentialism encourages social and political activism as a method of expressing freedom and reducing unjust conditions, many of his works discuss the mechanics of freedom in relation to societal structures, such as his critique of colonialism and advocacy for decolonization. However, Camus has reservations regarding revolutionizing ideologies that seek to establish order or meaning. He warns against revolutions that result in loss of human life for abstract ideals, advocating instead for a rebellion that supports individual dignity and resists all forms of authoritarianism, as discussed in *The Rebel*.

Ultimately, the philosophical dispute between Sartre and Camus concludes in the differing ethics that each presents. Ethics for Sartre are founded upon existential freedom, and authentic living occurs through conscious decision-making and recognition of others' agency. Camus's ethics, however, are influenced by the absurd, and the necessity of resisting the despair of living. Since Sartre views freedom as the basis for ethics, and Camus places greater value on preserving life and solidarity, Camus sees the importance of living in accordance with the constraints of the human condition.

In summary, Sartre and Camus agree on their commitment to existential humanism, but disagree in how they resolve the problems presented by freedom and absurdity. Sartre's emphasis on radical freedom and the call to action aligns with Camus's view of revolt and rebellion. In total, the two thinkers present differing views on how humans can deal with the struggles of existing, affirm their humanity, and engage with the world in meaningful ways. A comparison of their ideas demonstrates the complexity and variety found in existential humanism, further illustrating the ability of existential humanism to address a multitude of existential and ethical concerns.

Conclusion

Sartre's Existential Humanism provides a profound philosophical response to the problems and concerns of the 20th Century. In spite of the difference between them, both Sartre and Camus are concerned with the problem of authentic existence in an aimless universe. They emphasize the importance of individual freedom, and responsibility, as well as unity. Sartre's existentialist humanism emphasizes the power of radical freedom, where men create their own essence through deliberate choices and take responsibility for the creation of both personal and social meaning. Camus' absurdist humanism, however, focuses on resistance and rebellion, advocating that man confronts the absurd with courage and dignity, and refuses to succumb to either nihilism or false pleasure.

In combination, these two philosophies clearly point out the necessity of self-determination and ethical behavior within an uncertain existentially-based world. Sartre's advocacy of social and political involvement can be seen as complementing Camus' appeal for solidarity and resistance to injustice and absurdity; therefore, they provide a comprehensive paradigm for dealing with both personal and social crises. The enduring legacy of existential humanism is in its continued relevancy to today's existentially-related concerns; it offers tools to deal with present-day existential crises, while also offering the inspiration to demonstrate humanity through freedom, ethics, and the pursuit of meaning amidst the uncertainties of life. As a result, through Sartre and Camus, existential humanism remains a clarion call to recognize the complexities of existence, and to aspire to lead an authentic and dignified life.

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