

Sartre's Existentialism is a Humanism, and the Wizard of Oz

A talk given by Richard T. Hull at the Tallahassee U-U Church
24 March 2013

Poets, song-writers, and other thinkers have grappled with the enormity of the decisions we as individuals and as a nation, from time to time, have to make.

“Once to Every Man and Nation Comes the Moment to Decide” embodies some of the existential themes I want to discuss today, chiefly the idea that every person and nation has moments at which to decide between evil and good. James R. Lowell wrote these words as a protest against the US war with Mexico. Lowell emphasizes the moral responsibility that confronts us with the momentous decisions between whether to go to war or to seek peace. But while that theme of the importance of our individual decisions is clearly existentialist, the predicament of humans that leads to existentialism is yet stronger, for there is not, as Lowell thought, a divine guide to help us through such decisions. And life is a series of many such moments in which to decide. I want to explore such decisions absent the illusion of independent and divine guidance.

The lyrics of the song from *Damn Yankees* capture the psychological consequences of the loss of that illusion:

Two lost souls on the highway of life
We ain't even got a sister or brother
Ain't it just great, ain't it just grand?
We've got each other!

Two lost ships on a stormy sea
One with no sails and one with no rudder
Ain't it just great, ain't it just grand?
We've got each udder!

We're two lost souls on the highway of life
And there's no one with whom we would ruther
Say, “Ain't it just great, ain't it just grand?”
We've got each other!

So I turn to my favorite existentialist of this season.

A little over a year ago, Teresa MacBain, who from time to time worked as a Methodist Minister in Tallahassee, finally admitted that she was, at heart, an atheist, and set out on a change in the course of her life. She found herself confronted with one of those moments to decide, and making her decision, abandoned much of her past and set out on a new course of discovery, fraught with the risks that come from a loss of certainty. In the ensuing efforts, she found the ethical stance we have come to call Humanism.

Some five weeks ago, Teresa started a discussion in this room with members of the progressive communities of Tallahassee, of the question “What is humanism?” She employed The Wizard of Oz story, published in 1900, as a kind of allegory in order to illustrate a number of the virtues and commitments found among and advocated by humanists: courage, wisdom, compassion.

In this talk, I want to extend that discussion. I will first consider the views of Jean Paul Sartre, a French philosopher of the twentieth century. I will then return to the Oz story and illustrate Sartre's philosophy by reference to that story, retold by Teresa 5 weeks ago.

In 1946, Sartre (1905-1980) wrote a small book titled *Existentialism is a Humanism*; it sought to explain the existential themes illustrated in his early plays and short stories: *Nausea*, *No Exit*, and *The Wall*, and in his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness*. Let me quickly review the stories and content of these earlier plays and philosophical work, and then talk about *Existentialism is a Humanism* in its relation to that discussion led by Teresa MacBain last month.

Nausea, written in the late 1930s, explores a reaction by the chief character Roquentin to a growing awareness of the indifference of things in the physical world to his existence and whatever significance his human consciousness may attach to them. This growing awareness Sartre calls *nausea*, which term describes that most unpleasant sensation many of us have experienced when our bodies are subjected to a loss of solidity underfoot, on an ocean-going vessel, in an automobile, in an airplane.

The indifference of things in the world highlights what Sartre comes to call *dreadful freedom*: no god, no inherent natures, nothing objective can provide us with the meanings of things, let alone guidance for the decisions of life; we humans find in things only the meanings that we bring to them, and we must accept responsibility for making those evaluations or be guilty of what he calls "*Mal Fois*": Bad Faith.

Roquentin ultimately accepts the responsibility that comes with this dreadful freedom from external purpose, and realizes that there is no escaping the responsibility for creating the meanings of events. He thus begins to be *authentic*, in the sense of being the *author* of the meanings in his life. The key to the humanistic stance he advocates is the ability of individual human beings to transcend their individual circumstances and act on behalf of all humans as though we were the lawgivers. Key to this move is the realization that we have no law-giver except ourselves; the only universe we can influence is our universe of human institutions, the only laws of this universe are human laws.

Sartre continues his exploration of the theme of dreadful freedom in *No Exit*, a play about three individuals condemned to Hell for their sins, who find themselves cast together in a room with no exit. They start asking one another why they are there, and various denials of personal responsibility, claims of mistakes by others, etc. are issued. Then the characters begin to interact in ways that seek to perpetuate their self-images, each desperately seeking personal power over others and a consequent validation through the regard and opinion of those others. Finally they realize that they have no recourse but to get along, for eternity.

In *No Exit*, Sartre continues his theme that to blame other persons and circumstances and events for one's own misadventures and misdeeds is a kind of bad faith, a way of living inauthentically.

In *The Wall*, Sartre explores responsibility for the actual consequences of our choices, whatever their intended results.

Written in 1939, the story is set in the Spanish Civil War, begun on July 18, 1936, and ended April 1, 1939 when the *Nacionales*, led by General Francisco Franco, overcame the forces of the Spanish Republic and entered Madrid.

The title refers to the wall used by firing squads to execute prisoners. The Wall itself symbolizes the inevitability and unknowing of one's death. The protagonist, Pablo Ibbieta, along with two others in his cell, is sentenced to death. He is offered a way out if he reveals the location of his comrade, Ramón Gris. Pablo refuses to cooperate until just before his scheduled execution, when, seeing no harm in acting to forestall it, he gives the authorities what he believes to be false information on Ramón Gris's whereabouts. Ironically, it turns out that Ramón Gris has moved from his previous hiding place to the very spot where Pablo tells the authorities he may be found. Thus Ramón Gris is shot and Pablo's life is, at least temporarily, spared from death. And he must live with the guilt of having betrayed his friend in order to delay his own death.

Thus, we cannot use the anticipated outcomes of our choices as a justification for them. We must live with the knowledge that our efforts to do good may fail, and must make our choices without such justifications. To think otherwise is to live inauthentically.

The theme of living authentically pervades Sartre's work, and in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, he develops this theme into a kind of ethical system.

Existentialism is a Humanism was published in 1946 as a philosophical work. It is widely considered one of the defining texts of the Existentialist movement. The book is based on a lecture that Sartre gave at *Club Maintenant* in Paris, on October 29, 1945.

First, the practice of bad faith involves adopting roles as one's defining essence. Consider the difference between "I am a philosopher" and "I sometimes try to think about things philosophically." To say "I am a philosopher" is to declare myself as of a type, which type creates expectations about behavior that then become challenged when I (as frequently happens) make some stupid remark or fall into some other role (weekday chief chef, aspiring novelist, preacher at a church). The contrast is between "I am" and "I sometimes do." To identify with any one of our many roles and to take that role as a justification of our actions is to adopt a set of norms—an essence—as one's definition. And that is inauthentic because it appeals to intended outcomes as justifications for our behaviors. And it also appeals to an implicit superiority: a kind of "speaking as your doctor, or minister, or financial adviser, or professor, etc." appeal to authority—an authority that we cannot have.

Second, the notion of *dreadful freedom* involves our being condemned, not by some court of justice, but by the facts of our existence, to having no external source or guidance onto which to load the consequences of our choices and actions.

In his essay, Sartre asserts that the key defining concept of existentialism is that the *existence* of a person precedes and predetermines his or her *essence*. The term "existence precedes essence" subsequently became a maxim of the existentialist movement. Put simply, this means that there is nothing to dictate what will be a person's character, goals in life, and so on, except that person herself; that only the individual can define his or her essence. According to Sartre, "Persons first of all exist, encounter themselves, surge up in the world—, and define those selves afterwards".

Thus, Sartre rejects what he calls "*deterministic excuses*" and claims that people must take *responsibility* for their behavior and circumstances. Sartre defines "*anguish*" as the emotion that people feel once they realize that there is no reassurance that their choices are right, and that they're responsible not just for themselves, but for all humanity.

Anguish is also associated with Sartre's notion of despair, which he defines as optimistic reliance on a set of possibilities that make action possible but do not determine its consequences. The authentic person uses despair to embrace freedom and take meaningful action in full acceptance of whatever consequences may arise as a result.

Sartre describes *abandonment* as the loneliness that atheists feel when they realize that there is no God to prescribe a way of life, no guidance for people on how to live; that we're abandoned in the sense of being alone in the universe and the arbiters of our own essence.

Now, there is certainly something implausible about reading L. Frank Baum's Wizard of Oz story as an existential tale! Baum first published the story in 1900; Sartre began articulating in 1938 and while a few authors had voiced existentialist themes before, there is no evidence that they influenced Baum or Baum them. Nonetheless, the bridge between existentialism and humanism that Sartre offers can reasonably be crossed in interpreting the Oz story.

First, Dorothy being swept up in a tornado can be taken to symbolize the loss of one's grounding in the certitudes of normal existence. I recall the first time I saw the movie production feeling something akin to nausea as I saw the

house careening through the swirling winds. The swooping descent and the crushing landing on one of the wicked witches of the story symbolize how events that we are involved in, however unintentionally, can have deadly consequences.

Dorothy undertakes on the advice of others a trip to see the so-called powerful Wizard of the Land of Oz. On the way, she meets three other, existentialist characters: the scarecrow, the tin woodman, and the cowardly lion. Each of these engages in personal laments: If only I had a brain! If only I had a heart! If only I had some courage! Such laments are typical of individuals who manifest bad faith, who refuse to accept the responsibility to deal with their limitations and looks to an Other to provide relief.

For Dorothy and these three characters set off to meet the Wizard, whom they hope will give each what is wanting. After many misadventures, they come to the Emerald Palace, only to find that the Wizard assigns them the task of satisfying his desire to rid Oz of another witch. They set off and, after many more misadventures during which, despite the professed lacks of the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman and the Cowardly Lion, each performs as though he had the virtues that he seeks.

Dorothy, having accidentally dispatched the witch with a bucket of water as she tries to put out a fire with which the witch is threatening the Scarecrow (another unintended consequence of an act with a different intent), leads her troop back to the Wizard for his completion of their bargain.

After all sorts of flim-flam designed to put his cadre off of their quest, the Wizard is exposed for the humbug he is. Nonetheless, he turns out to be a rather wise and kindly fellow, who provides each with a symbol of the knowledge that what was wanted is already within each of them: The Scarecrow, despite his self-doubts, has performed cleverly throughout their trials. The tin woodman has manifested compassion repeatedly, and the cowardly lion has risen to the challenge of fearful situations despite his timidity. All receive the external symbols of their inner qualities: Scarecrow a diploma, Tin Woodman a clock in the shape of a heart, and the Lion a medal of honor.

Before I finish with Dorothy, I need to observe that another analogy between Baum's story and Sartre's life is present here. Just as these external symbols that the three have received bear no importance to the qualities of what they have done, so Sartre rejected the Nobel Prize for Literature that was awarded him, declaring it to be bourgeois!

Finally, Dorothy's quest to return to Kansas is seemingly frustrated when she races after her dog as the balloon that the Wizard has promised her will bring her back to Kansas is launched and flies away. The story in OZ ends positively when Glenda, the good witch, reminds Dorothy that the ruby slippers she inherited from the first witch can carry her home.

The final existential moment in Baum's work comes as Dorothy recovers consciousness from her coma and finds herself surrounded by all the characters of her dream, but in their real-life forms. She articulates the final message of the story: "There's no place like home." Sartre might say that, as home is a construct of our relationships with one another, this affirmation is an affirmation of humanism: of the values that humanism advocates: the virtues of courage, wisdom, and compassion in the face of the brute, unfeeling realities of the physical world. We find our salvation not in another world, but in the world of the human family.