



POSITIVE EXISTENTIALISM

*Táim ann agus ceapaim, mar sin tá a fhios
agam gur mise.
(I exist and I think, therefore I know that I
am.)*

It seems that humans are unique on the planet in being self-consciously aware. We know that we are, we were born, we live and we die. Ours is a self-conscious existence. For other creatures, existence is unselfconscious. The birth of humanity involved the birth of the self.

The one thing that we do share with all other living things is that, normally, once coming into existence, we seek to exist for as long as possible.

But, during that time, we also reflect on existence. We ask questions about the species, the world and the universe. We ponder if there can be a meaning and a purpose to existence other than survival. As a result, we have science and philosophy.

The Universe

Science has told us, given the latest fossil evidence, that our species is at least 300,000 years old and it is speculated that it may in fact be about 500,000 in all. There has been life on earth for over 3.5 billion years and the planet is over 4.5 billion years old. Jumping to consideration of our universe, it began over 13.7 billion years ago. What came before then is not yet known, but one hypothesis

(ekpyrosis) is that our universe was preceded by others, in the context of a natural infinity, each exploding and imploding, one after the other cyclically. And so it will be ad infinitum into the future.

Currently, there are 200 billion observable galaxies and, for various reasons, it is believed that there are many more which will be detected by telescopic and radio-detection satellites in the near future. In our own galaxy, there are at least 100 billion stars. A question is the number, probably billions upon billions, of stars in all the other galaxies. Then there is the issue of how many planets each star may have; ours has eight. Apart from all that, what if there is not only an observable and an unobservable universe in which we live, but other universes altogether?

Human Presence

The sheer vastness in time and space that we are talking about is truly awesome. For some people, it makes them feel depressingly insignificant to the point of virtual nothingness. But why should it? Why not just accept it as a magnificent fact which still leaves us with the certainty of our own existence in the here and now. Philosophy then enters the scene to wonder about origins, meaning and purpose.

As for origins, an infinitely cyclical cosmos as a manifestation of nature at its grandest no longer requires creation stories as such. However, some philosophers still suggest that there is an overlying supernatural explanation for even an ekpyrotic cosmos, whereas others see no need for such an explanation. Along with Parmenides, they maintain that it is simply a matter of what is, is, which is much the same attitude as that of Kong Fu Zi (Confucius).

What is generally agreed is that philosophy

is necessary in relation to moral behaviour, life's significance and our set objectives.

Angst and Dread

In previous articles (*The Case of Humanism Restated*), I addressed these considerations.

What I want to examine in this article are the responses to existence of some philosophers in terms of angst and dread. One thinks of the likes of Nietzsche and Sartre. In their personal lives and social setting, they were post-religious, disaffected bourgeois whose response to the death of god generated a high degree of philosophical neurosis. Yet for others the demise was like the expiry of a theological tyrant leading to a feeling of intellectual liberation.

Mortality

There is little doubt that the grip of religion on most arises not from searching for a first cause of the universe or from the dauntingness of accounting for the complexity of the world, but from the finality of death. In line with what we said to begin with, no other creature has a sense of its own end as distinct from the danger which might objectively result in that situation. In the pulsating moment of our existence, it is hard to envisage what is in effect a return to non-existence or to avoid a fear of it coming about. Among other things, what success religion has had with people is largely due to convincing them that there is a life after death and, even better, that they will live forever, hopefully in bliss.

Whatever about immortality, it is perfectly understandable that people would like to live longer than they usually do, especially when the quality of life has been so much improved by science and a discrepancy has developed between mental vitality and physical longevity whereby the latter cuts short the former. In due course, this discrepancy will be greatly diminished as science advances further. But, today, we have not arrived at that point.

Fantasy

So, what do we turn to in this predicament? One path is fantasy. Fantasy is part and parcel of the human condition. When life is inadequate, we naturally fantasise. We

fantasise about the love we don't experience, the sex we don't get, the jobs we don't obtain, the money we don't have, and so on. And when it comes to death, we are tempted to fantasise about an afterlife. Religion depends on this phenomenon and feeds it relentlessly. In the process, it either distracts from existence or diminishes it.

However, as with all fantasies, there comes a point when we appreciate what they are and are compelled to deal with realities. Science and philosophy together have largely come to

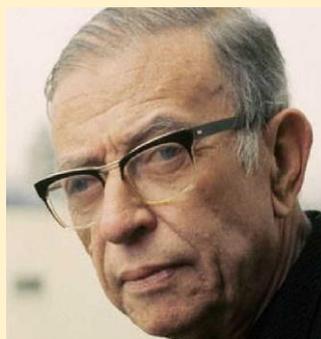


that stage of realisation for a lot of people. We must then ask ourselves what is the most rational way of responding to the reality. Instead of wasting time on and becoming depressed about the what will never be, is it not more sensible to concentrate on the what is and what can be. Should we not exult in existence and make

the most of it? Let the artist be enthralled by art, the public servant feel good about serving the people, the producer be proud of his/her produce, the lover be entranced by love, and so on throughout society.

Realism

That is not to say naively that life can be all plain sailing. Of course, not. There will be inescapable suffering in life and premature death from disease and accident. Even later in life, the passing of a partner or friends means grief and bereavement. One has no alternative but to cope with the ineluctable, while most of disappointment fortunately is not the everyday



norm. There are also the inequalities and injustices which are met with in society. But one does not have to be stoical about the status quo. That is where change can and should be brought about. The overall point is that the existence which endures throughout all does not have to be miserable because it is not endless. One sometimes has to look at the bottle as half full or half empty. And

there is nothing to be gained from the latter perspective.

Fulfilment

The most ridiculous attitude is to react in a state of dejection to the post-religious age because it no longer contains the promise of paradise. There never was a paradise and there never will be. There is only existence. It

is the only certainty and the only source of possibility. We have to choose to live or to hallucinate. And to live, individually and together, can mean so much more when we apply our talent and creativeness to it.

In place of acquiescing in the negative existentialism of angst, let us live the positive existentialism of fulfilment.

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh