

# The Case for Humanism

## Part 2

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

**I**t should be emphasised that we have been talking about so far as basic is *primary* morality involving life and death, personal security, human solidarity, and so on. But, there is also broader or *secondary* morality involving questions such as those of divorce, contraception, abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, justifiable violence, etc. Primary morality is distinguished by its being universally agreed on, whereas with secondary morality there is no consensus in principle or practice across the species. What is then necessary is widespread engagement in ethical debate and the search for maximal accord, taking into account the boundary between public law and private choice.

Yet even when existence is made secure, we search for significance in life. For some people, this requires a godly universe with a purpose in which we strive to meet what is demanded of us by a divinity through living an aptly conducted life. Whence do purpose and meaning come if we live in a godless and neutral universe? The answer is ‘ourselves’. We decide on and give meaning to our lives. We are our own inspiration. As Erich Fromm once put it, the meaning of life is in living. In other words, significance can only be realised *ante-mortem*, while the fiction of immortality results in the devaluation of life.

Humanism deals with the reality of existence, not the fantasy of the ethereal. Some experience meaning in the arts, others in their professions, others again in public service, to give but a few illustrations. There are seemingly endless ways in which meaning can be found. Some religious people insist that meaning simply cannot be found in life without a god. Yet, there are multitudinous examples of those who in real life falsify that proposition. And, in so doing, they underscore that it is not just a matter of different paths to the one meaning, but in fact of many meanings covering different people, while of course some may share the same meaning. One of the things to remember here is that individual diversity and uniqueness are more particular to the human animal than any other. But the common factor is that *all* can have meaning of a suitable kind. And what underlies this is human autonomy rather than divine authority. That is the real human condition.

Simpliciter, life has to be based on what we know to be the realities of existence and the universe. It has to rest on the ‘what is’, not on the ‘what is wished to be’ or the ‘what is believed ought to be’. Yet, that seems too stark for some. So the response is fantasy and self-deception.

But ultimately, that reaction leads to neglect of the actual possibilities of life. It is ultimately a loser. To yearn for a life in the supernatural signals a failure to live fully in the natural. Heaven (of course we are never going to hell) is held out as the ultimate avoidance of disappointment. Instead of confronting and coping with the latter when it occurs in life, it is parked in the queue to eternity.

Nor is there a need to become depressed by Nietzschean fear of chilling despair or Sartrean anxiety in the face of existential anomie, both of which apprehensions generated anguished strivings towards ‘overcoming’. Emotionally, some varieties of existentialism have the same effect as the religious devaluation of human beings as sinners.

These fears were largely the result of a distinctive form of PTSD, namely Post Theistic Stress Disorder, which has been elevated philosophically beyond its due. True, Nietzsche and Sartre point respectively to the more positive possibilities of will to power (for the elite) and freedom in authenticity (hopefully for all), but there remains the awesome threat for many of being hurled into the abyss of nihilism.

Of course, there is contingency and tragedy in life with which one has to cope, but there is no justification for allowing this to be represented as the leitmotif of existence. Instead of reacting with existential despondency, the humanist should be foremostly concerned with the positive and creative potential of life.

Naturally, life must cease. We are not infinite, not only in the sense that we will not go on forever (does anybody really want to), but also in the sense that we have not already been here before. We do not dwell on the fact that we did not exist prior to conception; rather are we concerned by the prospect of unavoidable expiry, which is in fact a return to nonexistence, a future which is thus a mirror of the past. It is understandable that we would prefer not to become nonexistent, but the rational being has simply to come to accept it. Why spoil present possibility by dwelling on future inevitability? On the other hand, longevity is a reasonable desire which is increasingly being fulfilled by economic and medical circumstance, while eternal life remains fanciful thinking. We can in fact invest in life and then finally repose in a dreamless sleep.

(I have long since noticed that some ‘nonbelievers’ enduringly bear the psychic marks of a religious upbringing whereby they understandably can never —>



wholly shake off emotionally the effects of the indoctrination that they were subjected to in childhood, no matter how hard the intellect tries, while there are others who are not so burdened owing to being less 'got at' in their earlier years. As for Nietzsche, his father was a Lutheran pastor. For his part, Sartre was reared in a decidedly religious household with a mixture of pronounced Protestant and Catholic doctrines in it. In addition, one is offered bleak pictures of the world by others yet again who were likewise affected by personal conditions or experiences.

**A humanist existentialism can reasonably exult in life, not tamely shrivel in it; for many if not most of the non-religious, the death of religion, and its gods and goddesses, is an occasion of liberation, if not elation**

For instance, the atheistic Schopenhauer [an early influence on Nietzsche] was a misanthrope, a catastrophist about life and a chronic depressive. Looking to the East, Siddhartha Gautama [the Buddha], no theist either, was appalled by the destitution he discovered outside his palace, which was typically to be found in the Indian subcontinent of 2,500 years ago, and responded by adopting a path to nirvana [literally transcendental extinction of individual Being]).

The most that is sometimes offered in such perspectives is fatalistic resignation rather than optimistic participation in life. In fact, there is an ironic psychological congruence between a certain type of existentialist dread and religious misery. These philosophies, sometimes presumptuously presenting themselves as the ultimate in insight, and as the articulation of a supposedly underlying and allegedly inescapable angst, exude a joylessness that simply need not be and is far from being the inescapable result of a search for essential truth.

A humanist existentialism can reasonably exult in life, not tamely shrivel in it; for many if not most of the non-religious, the death of religion, and its gods and goddesses, is an occasion of liberation, if not elation. In reality, some dejected existentialists could just be viewed as illogically extrapolating from a personal particular to a societal general. One might further speculate that what one is encountering here may also to a certain extent be an alienation of some bourgeois from their own class's creation of flaccid, individualistic consumer-capitalism. But that is a subject for another day). 1

Finally, there is an inherent need in us to seek the profound enrichment that comes from love and respect. Again, we must give in order to receive. But it is not a matter here just relating to security of one's person, but of completion and fulfilment in our being. Our individual Being is the I, the core of the human existent. The I is not a loner, and is imbued with the constant urge to be intensely unalone. The yearning for completion is captured by the Greek myth that the earth was once populated by noble creatures whom the gods sundered in two and whose parts have ever since been in search of their other halves. When they meet, they experience the sublime in loving reunification. The parts have entered into wholeness again.

That is the consummation of personal existence and the achievement of supreme harmony. (This could also be

viewed as a form of transcendental assurance). And one can on that basis proceed to embrace the human race of which one is also a part through being in communion with it. Thus is existence further enhanced through engagement with our essence, viz the common humanity that we all share, which both precedes and succeeds us, which is perpetual and not ephemeral. 2

*"We should as far as possible immortalise ourselves"* – Aristotle.

*"Melancholy is always bad"* – Baruch Spinoza.

NOTES

1. "God is dead, but considering the state the species man is in, there will perhaps be caves, for ages yet, in which his shadow will be shown." – Friedrich Nietzsche. Not necessarily intended at that stage as a self-reflection, but perhaps, nonetheless in fact so. At school, Nietzsche was recorded as excelling in Christian theology. He also subsequently did one semester as a trainee pastor. "That God does not exist, I cannot deny. That my whole being cries out for God, I cannot forget" – Jean-Paul Sartre.

2. Existence is typically characterised by change; we (individual humans) change, the world around us changes. And the essence of which we are a part (common humanity) also can change over time as evolution shapes new general physical and psychological attributes for it. Moreover, we search in the essence for the ideal, i.e. the best attributes to inspire us and to seek to realise in existence. □

**"Humanism is a philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of all humanity, of application of new ideas of scientific progress for the benefit of all"**  
**- Linus Pauling**

