

WHY WE REVOLUTIONARY BELIEVERS LOVE EXISTENTIALISM¹

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First of all, allow me to explain the ‘we’ in the title by way of a kind of hope or prayer: when I say ‘we,’ I mean ‘I,’ but I hope this ‘I’ may also be/become a ‘we’ or an ‘us’ . . .

And when I say ‘revolutionary believers,’ of course I am playing with the double meaning of this phrase. On the one hand, a revolutionary believer is a non-traditional believer, one whose faith is radical, heretical, unorthodox in some sense. Take me, for example: I reject almost everything about Christianity, retaining a minimal, non-dogmatic, open faith; a believer who recognizes their faith *as faith*. A believer who retains Christianity’s radical core and abandons its credal, ecclesial, ritualistic and other overlays. A self-described ‘anti-Christian Christian.’ This is one sense of the phrase ‘revolutionary believer.’

On the other hand, there is also the ‘revolutionary believer’ in the sense of the committed political radical, such as the Marxist activist, of whom Che Guevara is perhaps the most iconic figure. And, yes, despite my cowardice, I am just beginning to identify myself with and acting in solidarity with this other sense of ‘revolutionary believer’: I wholeheartedly cognize, confirm, and affirm that what the

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world desperately needs is radical political-economic transformation. Revolution. Communism – or more precisely: neo-communism. Or something like it.

Now, by employing and deploying ‘revolutionary believers’ in both senses, I am already linking the two, as if they have something or some things in common. I am already linking the two and suggesting that the two exist in me, that my ‘I’ is doubled, that this ‘me’ is in some sense a ‘we’: an anti-Christian Christian and an anti-communist communist (and a lot more, besides). A believer who believes in the revolution. This sounds, does it not, like an audacious – even ridiculous – claim? That some kind of ‘theistic’ believer would have something in common with, say, the atheist Marxist radical? On the contrary – and quite surprising to me, too – the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive and may indeed have something or some things in common. In fact, they may even be intertwined. Like lovers.

I could not possibly offer any ‘precise’ presentation about this relation between radical faith and radical politics, not only because I myself have only recently discovered it and have only begun thinking about it (a pre-occupation that will occupy me for the rest of my life, no doubt), but also because here I shall only *begin* to articulate it – but the present context further prohibits any attempted precision anyway: I have set myself here the even more quasi-impossible task of disclosing this relation in the context of existentialism, so the imprecision doubles and multiplies: for existentialism is itself a sprawling, messy thing – indeed, it is many things, and so it might be more precise to speak of *existentialisms* rather than ‘Existentialism.’

Indeed, I shall not even begin by offering some kind of ‘definition’ of existentialism – which is how the astute and conscientious scholar usually begins (as I often do), for a whole host of reasons: partially due to existentialism’s sprawling character; partially because the emphasis here is on explaining why we love it rather than defining it – what I’m presenting here is more of a love story than an exposition.² For loving something isn’t quite the same as knowing it. Of course, by speaking about our love affair with existentialism, I will go some way towards describing it, more or less precisely.

Now, to talk about this trinity, this *ménage à trois* of faith and communism and existentialism – and in a relatively short period of time – is somewhat impossible, although apparent impossibles are things we revolutionary believers love. And so, the need for a certain degree of imprecision, for generalization, for sweeping statements. Of course, to the overly-conscientious scholar, all this imprecision would be a horrible thing (and I insincerely apologize to any idolizers of precision amongst you). But perhaps, sometimes, imprecision leads to insight. Or something like it.

Perhaps I can proceed to identify and briefly explore just some of the reasons why we revolutionary believers love existentialism by offering a kind of critical

² We may offer here an abridged definition of existentialism as provided by Charles B. Guignon in *The Shorter Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2005, p. 252): “First, existentialists hold that humans have no pre-given purpose or essence laid out for them by God [*sic*] or nature; it is up to each one of us to decide who and what we are through our own actions. . . . Second, existentialists hold that people decide their own fates and are responsible for what they make of their lives. . . . Finally, existentialists are concerned with identifying the most authentic and fulfilling way of life possible for individuals.”

commentary or meditation on a really fascinating monologue – my personal favourite – in that most intriguing semi-animated philosophical film, *Waking Life* (released in 2001). The short discourse I am talking about is provided by the American philosopher Robert J. Solomon (born in 1942, dying in 2007). Speaking in a really disarming, unassuming way, Solomon is captivating right from the beginning; the first thing he says is:

The reason why I refuse to take existentialism as just another French fashion or historical curiosity is that I think it has something very important to offer us for the new century.

Speaking of the French and of history, let us really quickly re-trace existentialism's roots. It is certainly not just a historical curiosity but a sprawling tradition or loose set of traditions with a magnificent history/histories: its precursors include the biblical Book of Job (written about 25 centuries ago) and Augustine's *Confessions* (written a little more recently, some 16 centuries ago); then the existentialist 'vibe' becomes more explicit – and incidentally starts becoming more of a French 'thing' – in the thinking of that French genius living in the 1600s, Blaise Pascal (one of my favourite thinkers, a thinker I love); then the existentialist impulse finds expression in various ways by brilliant philosophers and writers like Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, and Nietzsche (my favourite thinker, the thinker I love the most); then Sartre, Camus, and other philosophers and novelists, playwrights, and film-makers

popularized it, so that today it is known by many of us, even if in more ‘vulgarized’ or ‘caricatured’ figurations, as a ‘French fashion’ and ‘historical curiosity.’

Existentialism, to put it imprecisely, is one of the best things humanity has conceived/discovered, experienced, and shared. It deserves our attention – and our love. To this day, I remain perplexed (and a little annoyed) by the fact that existentialism barely gets taught at English-speaking universities, perhaps because it may be too imprecise for the very precise Anglo-American analytic philosophy that dominates today. Phenomenological and postmodern philosophies (which I also love, and whose relation to existentialism shall be duly discussed) have also overshadowed existentialism. Which is a bit of a shame, not only for us revolutionary believers, but also for undergraduate students who miss out on existentialism’s unnerving exhilaration. (My advice to philosophy course coordinators hankering for greater student enrolments would be this: if you want greater numbers, offer existentialism. After all, French fads and historical curiosities tend to get people’s attention.)

Returning to Solomon’s opening remark, note also his proposal that existentialism “has something very important to offer us for the new century”: something or some things, some important things, many important things – some of which I am attempting to briefly articulate here. Now, let’s recall that the movie *Waking Life* came out in 2001, before the sub-prime crisis, before the Global Financial Crisis, before the Eurozone crisis – and let’s not forget that, since 2001, the world has become ever-more-aware of the climate-change calamity-in-the-making. So many crises. This ‘new century’ is already a catastrophe (as well as an

opportunity). We revolutionary believers therefore love those currents of thought that can offer this new century some guidance, some wisdom, some inspiration, some edification. Like existentialism.

Let us proceed. The wise Solomon then states:

I'm afraid we're losing the real virtues of living life passionately, the sense of taking responsibility for who you are, the ability to make something of yourself . . .

'Passion': there are few words – perhaps none – I love more; there are few things – perhaps nothing – I adore more. To live life passionately: a shared imperative for the radical believer and the radical activist. Whatever your opinion of Christ and/or Che, you can't accuse them of being passionless souls. And they took responsibility not only for who they were, but also for a beautiful but disfigured world. They took responsibility, which also meant responding to an unjust world, by confronting it, making a difference, making a difference for the better – albeit the price for making such a difference was death, nailed by an unjust world, by stakeholders of an unjust world: the Roman Empire, the Jewish hierarchy, the Bolivian authorities, the CIA.

Christ and Che (and others like them): they made something of themselves, something *more of* themselves, something *more than* themselves. Nietzsche's *Über-people*, no? And, yes, to be a radical Christian and/or Marxist, to live this radical passion and passionate radicalism through to its logical conclusion, is to not only make something of oneself but also to give of oneself, to give oneself up for a

Cause. There's some old words for that: sacrifice, martyrdom. I consider their Causes – perhaps reducible to timeless passions for justice, sharing, loving . . . – as Causes worthy of self-sacrifice.

But in a cynical, apathetic, detached age, we are certainly losing the virtues of passion, of passionate responsibility, of making something of ourselves, of a self-making and self-giving making a difference to the world. I think it was Slavoj Žižek, perhaps/probably the most passionate philosopher alive today (another thinker whom I love), who stated somewhere that what was truly shocking about September 11 is that the hijackers *had a Cause*, that they were passionately willing to slam planes into buildings and other hard places: yes, the acts themselves remain truly spectacular, truly shocking, but the fact that the hijackers *had a Cause* – isn't this a deeper shock to us passionless souls who have no Cause, who just have our *petit-bourgeois* whims and our beige, mediocre existences? After all, who among us would surrender their life willingly – passionately – for a Cause?

Solomon continues:

Existentialism is often discussed as if it's a philosophy of despair. But I think the truth is just the opposite. Sartre once interviewed said he never really felt a day of despair in his life. But one thing that comes out from reading these guys is not a sense of anguish about life so much as a real kind of exuberance of feeling on top of it . . .

Solomon's passion for existentialism, his exuberance, has obviously skewed his judgement here (so we forgive him and even admire him even as we correct him): even a naive reader of existentialism certainly gets a sense of its despair. The Existentialism Society of Melbourne itself underlines this very point: on the home page of its website, it states: "For those who *despairingly* ponder . . ." (italics added).³ If there may be one thing we could be precise about when it comes to existentialism, it's this: that it's a philosophy of despair – oftentimes written with despair, with desperation. But let us not deride despair: it is a passionate feeling, something experienced by the impassioned in the face of the possible meaninglessness, apparent absurdity, and certain injustice of life.

Existentialism, then, is certainly a philosophy of despair. However, Solomon is not wholly incorrect, for he is also right, he is half-right: existentialism is certainly not *just* about despair; it is *also* about exuberance. Existentialism is both. Together. Intertwined. Like lovers. What is great about Solomon's remark is that it re-emphasizes a perhaps-often-forgotten side of existentialism rather than just despairingly focusing on its despair, on its 'pessimism.' After all, existentialism affirms that we are free (more or less); that the future is open (more or less); and so on.

This exuberance, this affirmativeness – this is one of the reasons we revolutionary believers love existentialism. We are eternal optimists, restless with

³ The whole blurb reads: "For those who question whether life has a meaning and a purpose. For those who despairingly ponder whether one can live without self-deception or without hedonistic escapism; yet who, despite the anguish of life's futility, still seek purpose and an authentic existence." Existentialist Society website, <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~exist/>.

hope; we do not allow the apathy and cynicism and negativity to take hold. The true Christian and the true Marxist is filled with the joy that comes from believing in and fighting for possibilities that a cynical world calls ‘impossible.’

As for Sartre and his purported remark that he never felt a day of despair in his life, maybe we should take him on his word, but maybe we should also remember that the French – and not just the French – have a tendency for hyperbole, for overstatement; maybe Sartre’s statement was just an example of exaggeration borne of existential exuberance.

Solomon then goes on to say a thing or two about postmodern philosophy:

I’ve read the postmodernists with some interest, even admiration. But when I read them, I always have this awful nagging feeling that something absolutely essential is getting left out. The more that you talk about a person as a social construction or as a confluence of forces or as fragmented or marginalized, what you do is you open up a whole new world of excuses.

I, too, have read the postmodernists with some interest, even admiration, and – yes – even love. And once again, Solomon is half-wrong and half-right. On the one hand, “The more that you talk about a person as a social construction or as a confluence of forces or as fragmented . . .,” the more you learn about the nature of personhood, about the complex – indeed, somewhat elusive, abyssal, mysterious –

nature of the self; we should indeed admire and love the postmodernists for teaching us – or at least reminding us – that the ‘I’ is infinitely stranger than we could have possibly imagined. So, all these insights from the postmodernists have opened up a “whole new world” of *explanation* of selfhood. Solomon’s “awful nagging feeling,” then, shouldn’t necessarily have to do with “something absolutely essential . . . getting left out,” for these postmodern insights should be *included* in our conception of the human, thus *adding* to our understanding of subjectivity.

But Solomon is also right in claiming that postmodern knowledge about the self may also act as a “whole new world of excuses,” for it certainly undermines the notion of the utterly self-possessed, self-made, and therefore responsible/accountable person – a figuration of the individual obviously much-cherished by existentialists (and many others, besides). By complicating and even destabilizing the received and ‘commonsensical’ notion of the simply stable, unified, rational self, it could seem to be the case that we postmodern selves may now ‘excuse ourselves’ from any radical freedom and radical responsibility.

After all, given the radical de-centering of the subject, to what extent may we now enforce legal accountability, retribution, punishment? Given that the individual is more than – and otherwise than – the rational autonomous agent, does this mean we should forgive liberally (even infinitely)? Is there even any sense in speaking of an ‘active’ agent? The questions, the doubts, multiply. So Solomon certainly has a point, and we can identify with his “awful nagging feeling” about excusing ourselves from responsibility and action.

Who, then, is ‘right’? – or, to put it another way, which philosophy should we follow? Existentialism or postmodernism? Is the self autonomous, free, responsible? Or is it constructed, divided, a matrix of forces? There is no need to choose here. I would respond to this conundrum in the following way: in just the same way that existentialism does not respond despondently to a possibly meaningless and certainly absurd existence, trudging through life, but asks instead that we embrace being with courage and purpose, so, too, do we continue to act as self-possessed and radically responsible individuals who are “condemned to be free” *even in* the face of our social constructedness, our constitution as matrices of forces, as fragmented, fluid, multiple selves, and so on.

A tough ask? Well, relatively: I presume even the staunchest postmodernists still go about their everyday lives ‘as if’ they’re free and autonomous agents, though it’s also true that we postmoderns are also overly self-conscious, excessively self-reflexive – perhaps even too *paralyzed* to act politically, to act decisively. But the revolutionary believer, the anti-Christian Christian and the anti-communist communist, should face and embrace the postmodern truths about selfhood without losing heart, just as the revolutionary believer shouldn’t be discouraged by an absent/elusive divinity or by the apparent permanence of capitalism. The point here is not that existentialism or radical faith or radical politics are deluded, but that they persist – albeit in more informed and transformed forms. This is the challenge for us neo-existentialists who do not deny but acknowledge and affirm postmodern truths.

After all, just like radical faith and radical politics, existentialism is not perfectly precise – just as postmodern philosophy is not perfectly precise. However, all of these thoughtful currents may critically inform each other, so that they can all become more precise, more truthful. What we get is a more rigorous existentialism. For example, environmental philosophy focuses less on our despairing aloneness and more on our relationality (Kate Rigby – my teacher, doctoral supervisor, and inspirer – raised this possibility for existentialism, for an ecological existentialism, at a talk she gave here last year). With all of this interactivity and mutual informing, what we get is a more ecological-existential postmodern philosophy. What we get is a more existential-postmodern faith. And so on. Each affecting each other. Like lovers.

And so, open-mindedness and the revision of our thoughts in light of the disclosure of various rigorous knowledges are things we neo-revolutionary believers love. For just as we reject dogmatic religion and dogmatic Marxism, so, too, do we reject any dogmatic atheism, existentialism, postmodernism. . . .

Solomon ends his monologue with the following remarks:

And when Sartre talks about responsibility, he's not talking about something abstract. He's not talking about the kind of self or soul that theologians would argue about. It's something very concrete. It's you and me talking. Making decisions. Doing things and taking the consequences. . . . what you do makes a difference. . . . In short, I think the message here is that we should never simply write ourselves off and

see ourselves as the victim of various forces. It's always our decision who we are.

Like the other quotes, this passage warrants much comment, requiring some correction, modification, extension. First of all, *if* Solomon exhibits a certain wariness or opposition to 'the abstract,' this is typically existentialist: existentialism is very much about 'the concrete,' the material, the everyday. Existentialism is not some hyper-lofty logic but addresses everyday life. It focuses on this world, this existence, and the individual's immersion in it.

In this context of a focus on 'the concrete,' what are we to make of a concept like 'the soul' to which Solomon refers? Certainly this idea has had the effect of degrading the body, materiality, the Earth itself, by privileging 'the spiritual' and the 'other-worldly' over and above the corporeal and the this-worldly. Such a privileging we revolutionary believers vehemently reject. More broadly, we revolutionary believers reject a theology of hierarchical dualism, which situates the divine 'above'/'versus' Creation, the human 'above'/'versus' other creatures, the male 'above'/'versus' the female, the soul 'above'/'versus' the body, and so on. This kind of rationale is obviously the conventional and dominant theo-logic, a most destructive rationale.

We must therefore and obviously abandon this kind of dualistic logic, but we shouldn't thereby abandon 'the abstract' (even if such a thing were possible), for aren't our lofty notions of 'the divine,' of a political economy of sharing, of a truly egalitarian community of earthly creatures, etc., not 'abstract' ideas that must be

made concrete? And so (and once again), the prudent move is not to choose between the one and the other, although today – with a looming ecological crisis – we must certainly emphasize the concrete, the carnal, Creation, re-imbuing them with the love and respect they deserve.

So what, incidentally, does all this mean for ‘the soul’? We revolutionary believers remain open to it as a possibility, but this openness certainly does not prevent us from simultaneously criticizing this particular abstraction whenever it is privileged ‘above’/‘versus’ the body, with all the negative anti-corporeal connotations and consequences that it entails. But even though some abstract ideas have a bad reputation, we neo-existentialists shouldn’t thereby simply abandon all abstractions, and even some of those with bad reputations may be saved if we radically re-configure them and their relation to other concepts.

I would also like to draw attention to the statement “we should never simply write ourselves off and see ourselves as the victim of various forces”: the key term here is, quite simply, the word ‘simply.’ This is a crucial term and qualifier which reinforces what I said about living *as if* we have a certain degree of autonomy, ‘free will,’ self-determination (in both senses). The word ‘simply’ indicates that we should persevere beyond the ‘limits’ that the postmodernists have brought to our attention and that we shouldn’t deny these limits, but that our resolve *to act* should not be shaken or paralyzed; that we act heroically *even if* we are ‘victims’ in some senses. For the hero is precisely one who acts in the face of the impossible.

I would like to conclude this presentation by focusing on the crux of this final passage: that “what you do makes a difference.” This phrase or catch-phrase

may sound like Oprah or self-help psycho-babble – and let me just begin by saying that these populist cultural phenomena are, no doubt, influenced and inspired by existentialism, whether they know it or not, and should therefore not be instantly dismissed by pretentious intellectualists. (At least Oprah was trying to uplift humanity [whilst simultaneously increasing ratings, of course].) But perhaps more importantly: *a truth is a truth*, even if it comes in the form of a cliché or soundbyte. So, what you and I do makes a difference; what humans have done and will do makes a difference. We revolutionary believers love existentialism because it believes – it shares our belief – that we make a difference.

But it is not enough – especially today, in this new century with its new and old crises, of multiple crises and multiplying sufferings – to simply declare that “we make a difference.” The time has come to ask ourselves: *What are we TO DO to make a difference? What are we to do that will make a difference FOR THE BETTER?*

Here’s where I think a radical faith and a radical politics may provide the content to the existentialist imperative to make a difference – content that will make a difference *for the better*. Both of these lines of thought and action offer many directives: to love and care for each other rather than fight and inflict suffering upon one another; to share what is produced rather than savagely competing, hoarding, and accumulating; to produce and consume according to planetary limits rather than pursue exponential economic ‘growth’ by means of exploitation and destruction; etc.

I am reminded here of Lenin [the Russian revolutionary, not *The Beatle*] who asked the same question over a century ago with *What Is To Be Done?* The eventual

answer for Russia, as we know, was the noble overthrow of an oppressive empire and the establishment of a structure of sharing. A combination of internal corruption and external bullying obviously led to the demise of the communist effort in Russia, though it should be remembered that a number of other nations continue to realize – more or less, and with varying degrees of success – the Communist Ideal. What we *shouldn't* do is be discouraged by the dismal communist failures, by the bad reputation communism has received, fairly and unfairly. Like the concept of 'the soul,' what we must now do is re-think 'communism' not only to avoid the catastrophes of the past, but to make it even more rigorous, more progressive, more ecological, more existentialist, etc. – a *neo*-communism. Or something like it.

And so, you and I – *we* – can make a difference (hence, my hope or prayer for an 'us' with which I began). You and I can make a difference, a difference for the better: the beautiful and terrifying name we revolutionary believers have for this making and doing is 'Neo-Communist Revolution.' Which is something I hope existentialists or neo-existentialists will love.