

Existentialist Society Lecture.

Buddhist Existentialism: at play with possibilities.

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Proposal For An Environmentally Sustainable Vision Of The Good Life And Philosophical Remedy For Our Existential Malaise.

1. Time To Tackle Time.

The tragic *look* of life and reality – rather than burying heads in the sand, why don't we face up to it as, e.g., the Buddha did, Nietzsche did, or the ancient Stoics? Life can seem harsh – disenchanted, as people say. No wonder T. S. Eliot observed that most folk live lives of quiet desperation. Or that so many in our society seem depressive, overanxious, overwrought – often overweight too. Maybe we can go “beyond blue”, as it were, with some applied philosophical inquiry?

If stuck in *ordinary* banal views, people might have a dose of the angst, even if typically they like to pretend otherwise. For they gloss over it, focussing on relatively superficial things instead – busyness, careers, the mass media, entertainments, Internet social networking, romance, etc. They evade the biggest issues in what existentialists called everyday inauthentic self-deception: the modern social lack of real philosophy.

Escapism is, of course, nothing but a shallow palliative. The basics remain: impermanence, insecurity, conflicts, pain, suffering, violence, illness, loneliness, ageing, death, the loss of love, people, and things, the horrors of history, the gnawing fears, etc.

However, we can learn from philosophy to critique ordinary worldviews and take *philosophical ownership* of the world in which we live (cf., Max Stirner).

Our critical power – Epictetus would say that is our resource here: the special virtue of the rational animal, *homo sapiens*, the power of sweet reason. “*Suck on the sweets of sweet philosophy.*” said Shakespeare. Be more rational – not, however, in the sense of so-called worldly prudence, itself based on dubious assumptions, but as wisdom: having the wit to deconstruct this “cruel world” or “modern reality” that tends to trouble us so.

After all, for all we know, any so-called reality, whether religious or secular, could be a trick, a simulation, or a con – a comprehensive deception. Remember the Matrix. We could be in one and we wouldn't know it. If we simply buy into so-called reality without using our critical powers philosophically, it becomes merely a fixated deception.

Well, why buy into any of the idols of the past? The question applies to every worldview, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Modern, Materialist, Atheist, etc. In fact, when I present ontology to students at RMIT they don't like *any* of the traditional worldviews! Not too surprising this. The worldviews appear simplistic, dogmatic, pessimistic, limiting and limited.

Rather than present one worldview as final truth, it would be more philosophically authentic in the Socratic sense to present an open-ended view grounded in nothingness.

Thus become the deconstructive player and owner of views. Play with the various language games, etc. *Be at play with possibilities.*

Let's consider this hypothesis: the cure for our existential malaise is a daily practice of philosophical meditation, an awareness that deconstructs to zero, so to speak. One can learn to critique and even *void* so-called reality. Thereby *disempower* it. “I take back its

alienated power *over* me. I touch it with the Zen-like diamond sword of insight, and the old idol of reality shatters!” – So one might learn to say.

Here’s an example. Say the past depresses you, the horrors of history, etc. Well then, negate and void the past. Take back its alienated power *over* you. Make it as nothing and thereby nothing much to you. After all, for all we know, seriously, it might never have existed, or not in the way we *think*. For all we know, we could have been born or created this very morning. The past could be naught but a trick, a banal fantasy, a nightmare, a nostalgia trip – “the good old days” cliché, or “the golden age” illusion, etc. Alternatively, we also have “the dark ages” cliché, or the “tragic world history” trap, etc.

Another example. Say the future scares you. Well then, negate and void the future. Take back its alienated power over you. Make it as nothing and thereby nothing to you. After all, for all we know, it may never happen. Somewhat as in the movie *Groundhog Day*, we could be living the same day over and over again. It’s possible. There might never be a tomorrow, never mind Macbeth’s “*tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow*”.

So the point is this: we are merely *projecting* in any moment of awareness a dubious *story* of linear time, of yesterday and tomorrow – *spooking* ourselves like a child with the bogeyman under the bed. Or alternatively, we could say of anything that seems bad in the past or future that it could actually be a necessary stepping-stone to something far better in the *future* future! Our situation is completely open-ended after all.

In short, how about we get *really* philosophical and question even the so-called reality of time. See how to deconstruct *that* to zero: the Zen-like singular moment – a unique singularity, this mysterious here-and-now immediacy. There need be no definite “given” past or future. Who says they exist? They are not sacred authorities!

“*But what if our own mind says they exist?*” – I hear you say. Well then, why not take proper ownership of your mind? Why permit yourself to be *owned by it*, i.e., enthralled by some fixated idea? Why not make your mind your servant rather than be its servant? Why not *master* your mind with some philosophy? After all, we can critique in Socratic fashion all knowledge-claims as merely dubious. Take ownership then of the old idols – e.g., the past and future, and other such so-called sacred truths. Why must we let ourselves be limited in our philosophical powers by the merely *apparent* reality of things? Instead – put up a fight! Rise up! One can learn to meditate *above* time. Get *over* it. *Let go of time!*

Which also implies: *let go of yourself*. Mr Buddha said: when we void egocentrism – separate temporal ego and its temporal affairs – life begins to seem *well*. Naturally green in the singular moment, a sudden incredible appearance to itself – a mysterious singularity in which we can learn to be at play with possibilities, including the maximally positive.

Nothing is sacred but by my bending the knee – so said that remarkable, much maligned and misunderstood philosopher, Max Stirner. Idols abound, but we can subvert them. From robotic habit, however, we backslide if we become distracted, as tends to happen every other moment of the day. For example: one easily gets tricked by the mind back into time, e.g., concerned about how things have been for you in the past or how things will go for you in the future. We may even slip into the mistake of thinking of how things will go for us in the future now that we are armed with this new philosophy that voids time!

2. So-Called Practical Life.

“*Yes, but surely we have to live in the ordinary world and function practically here.*” – I hear you say. Well okay, but – we can take it with a pinch of salt, i.e., story-wise, ironically. See it as only “the apparent temporal reality of life” and be able to critique it to its philosophical

“suspense” – its death. Learn how to let go of everything: all that seems solid melts into the air, as they say. The solid was only an assumption, after all.

Practicality is such an assumption too, although our modern time-and-efficiency managers would like us to believe it is the sacred truth itself. They would make an idol out of it and a slave out of us. But we can be the “hammers” of every idol, as Nietzsche said. For example, we can revolt and see this: there is no given so-called practical world, because “the practical” is a relative term in a language game and pragmatism a modern con – i.e., a story ossified into a taken-for-granted cliché some people call truth.

An example: many claim philosophy is impractical while so-called vocational courses are practical – hence better, more worthwhile, etc. However, vocational courses do nothing to cure our existential malaise or liberate us from the fetters and idols of this world – e.g., “the unsustainable consumerist vision of the good life”. Such courses tend to lock us further into busy lives of wasteful consumption, angst lurking just under the surface.

So one could as soon argue that philosophy is actually the most practical subject in the curriculum: a remedy for “civilisation and its discontents”. Perhaps we’ve all been conned by prudence when it is more prudent to be able to void the prudent? After all, how else are we to get a proper break from it all, release – a true holiday, not the wasteful consumerist kind on Hamilton Island, etc. We have to play in the reality game, as it were, but it is also good to take time out.

“But surely there is still old age, relentless loss, and death!” – I hear you say. But let’s ask: What is death? If we do not know the future exists, we do not know that death exists. Even if it does, we don’t know what it *means*. It could be a boon in disguise. It could be a gateway to a world beyond current comprehension. For all we know, it could be waking up to a better reality compared to which this life might seem a comparative nightmare.

Well, *who knows?* So bear that in mind too. Then, if we live an authentic philosophical moment, voiding cultural prejudices and returning to zero, even so-called death need not be a problem. Even this so-called “old age” business – what is *that* if there is no sacred linear time? There is no such thing as “getting old”. That too is a banal cliché, a *prejudicial* idea repeated in a modern language game – as is dismissing old folks as somehow inferior to young folks, or vice versa. A person could just as soon say, “I am in my prime today!” – and apply that to every day at any age. Today is “a good day to die”, as the Sioux said.

Well, also a good day to live in your prime.

3. Artistic Seductions.

Art – watch out! – don’t be fooled, e.g., by movies. They tend to spook us, i.e., to manipulate our sensibilities into making us think and emote in particular ways. We are easily spellbound into some tragic feeling, horrified feeling, sinking feeling – or alternatively some “feel good” Hollywood ending. Sheer trickery! This goes on in the media all the time, however. One is presented with a limited world from one culture’s point of view – typically the Western one of course – and this gets reinforced over and over or *hyper-realised*, as Jean Baudrillard would say.

Even movies about the past are from a modern viewpoint on the past. One can never access it accurately – assuming it even existed. Even movies that claim to be historical are unhistorical. *Representation is selection; selection is distortion; therefore, representation is misrepresentation.* Moreover, even if so-called past people existed, one cannot see things through their eyes or understand what was “practical” for them from their point of view – e.g., ancient Romans, medieval peasants, Samurai women, cannibals, etc.

Ontology is art too: seduction, linguistically skewed realities, etc. We could buy into it for some emoting perhaps – temporarily, as in a theatre – but be able to critique it also. Go with the flow of a movie, for example, up to a point; or likewise play along with a modern Australian worldview, up to a point. No need to be fettered or fooled by it. Thus, we need not set our affair on any one view. For, after all, there are many amazing possibilities to play with – indeed, a “new infinity” of them, as Nietzsche said.

4. Philosophical Irony.

Thus we might learn to be more ironic with texts and goals in life, even with the so-called world or reality. That would mean: although we are saying and doing something on the surface of life every day, underneath we are also saying and doing the virtual opposite – viz., the zero critique of all that, the Zen-like voidance.

The Socratic type is necessarily a great ironist – as Socrates himself was, according to Plato, even in the face of an unjust execution. For what is that exactly? What is “just” and what is “unjust”? These too are relative terms in limited language games. We can learn to take philosophical ownership of all such terms, either to use them positively in our play of possibilities or else dissolve them again in their nothingness.

If so, we are essentially at play in the world: philosophising with possibilities – which is indeed “the examined life” in daily action. As Socrates said, “the unexamined life is not worth living”. Why? – Because it is a dubious, ossified, closed, cliché-ridden life of temporal conventionalities. We might like to add nowadays that it is also *environmentally unsustainable* – more on this in a minute.

There is no idol that cannot be sounded out and shattered, it seems – e.g., God, romantic love, family ties, world religions, modern ideologies, scientific worldviews, time and space, the soul, egocentrism, dualism, the belief in separate entities, Western individualism – all the old ideas and ideologies. Being at play with possibilities, we do not even have to take so-called “other minds”, the so-called “material world”, or even one’s so-called “person” too seriously. Words and ideas are more like toys we are playing with that we can also put back in the toy box. Even put the toy box back in the toy box!

5. Philosophy Love.

It follows that the philosopher will have a unique kind of love or passion: not the conventional loves (e.g., romantic love, family love, God-centred love, moralistic love, or any kind of hedonistic consumer love) but philosophy love. That is, it is simply *philosophia* – the love of wisdom: wisdom being the passion to examine life every minute, the love of being at play with possibilities in every minute. Note this too: as this love is not dependent on any one external stimulus, e.g., lover or consumer item, it is not limited to this or that person, family, place, thrills, or goods. Philosophy thereby subverts modern romanticism and consumerism – the entire consumerist “good life” love idolatry.

Philosophy love is free. Indeed, it is freedom, self-sourced as wisdom. It is self-reliant and self-sufficient. It costs nothing. It can be present, daily. It comes from within and is expressed without, so it can in principle be unlimited. It can be expressed toward everything and everyone. In short, it is a universal kind of love rather than a love that is so narrow and limited it is merely for, e.g., one’s so-called partner, or family, or nation, or idol, or “gold ring of power” – or, for that matter, for one’s small personal so-called self and its dubious temporal self-interests in the world.

We can take philosophical ownership of love and life. Otherwise love and life takes ownership of us, like a dependency or addiction – a situation so decadent and unstable it

might well be called neurotic: e.g., being a shopaholic, workaholic, thrillaholic, etc. Nietzsche would say that in our “slave morality” culture we instinctively look for, and soon put ourselves into, new fetters and chains – e.g., modern romance and wasteful consumption. We flee freedom and mastery. That is, we evade philosophy. If there is a dishonesty and cowardice relative to our essential “species virtue” – hence something that could be called inauthentic – that is surely it. It is the flight from philosophy: the quick slide back into banal conventional life. (Most students accomplish it within two minutes of leaving class! The means is in their hands – a mobile!)

“*Okay, but how do we get to positive love from negative critique?*” – I hear you ask. Well, love like beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It is our cultural prejudice that creates *the unlovable*. Philosophical critique voids cultural prejudice. It unclogs the arteries of the mind, as it were, enabling a freer flow of positive energy and magnanimous goodwill to entertain the most positive of all possibilities: that everything and everyone is somehow or other right and good, hence loveable, even if we do not know or comprehend how or why it is. Well, we could perhaps all be God, Buddha always already, or Brahman playing a virtual-reality world-theatre game, for all we know. So why don’t we play with *that* amazing possibility more often, instead of the more banal ones we find in all our usual texts?

What perhaps dismays the philosophers the most – if I may put it this way with all due respect – is that we are rather second-hand people, cliché-ridden minds: culturally curtailed. It’s not our fault. It is just what the tribal conditioning does to us. It narrows the mind with opinions handed down the generations to make us fit in and be functional in a small parochial context. It gives us tunnel vision. Meanwhile, the actual context of life is huge, open-ended, unlimited, and impenetrably mysterious. It is a context-less context – like the so-called Tao that cannot be spoken. It is beyond words and explanations, hence beyond texts, beyond context.

Philosophy aims to smash any ingrained ideologies to open us up to life without prejudice and thereby enable a magnanimous “enlarged” goodwill toward “what is” as it is, nothing excluded. The enlarged or enlightened passion is to affirm, enjoy, and love it all – the pleasures and pains, all the seeming or relative good and bad that happens, taking it all in as part of the one comprehensive good we call “the examined life”.

Note that philosophy love is not only more reliable, rooted in wisdom and character, relatively independent of externals, it is even in principle an invincible love. How so? Because even the so-called bad that may arise – e.g., bad feelings, blue moods, weakness, anger, panic, etc. – is taken up and integrated into the good, hence into the lovable. So even if this love were to fail for a time, it would be successfully renewed in the act of integrating that failure back into the love. Essentially then, it cannot be defeated. We bounce back, and the more we do this, the quicker it becomes.

So the true philosopher is not like the person in that old Simon and Garfunkle song who says, “*I am a rock, I am an island/ And a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries.*” Rather, we say, “I am not a rock, but I am resilient; I am not an island, but I have insight.” A resilient person can feel panic or pain all right, maybe cries at times too, but soon recovers and laughs inwardly again. True health is not to be measured by how long we go without ever getting panicked, wounded, or ill; true health is to be measured by how long recovery takes. Philosophy health is how long it takes us to regain our good wits, our goodwill and good spirits: i.e., our essential eudemonia and virtue/arête.

6. Philosophy: The Joyful Wisdom.

Philosophy meditation is enlightenment. Enlightenment is enlargement of mind: broadness and openness – being “big enough” to love everything. We don’t defer to any

small sacred worldview, any religious creed, atheism or materialism, etc., or seek “the closure of the inquiring mind” in any such ways. Rather, we leave it all open – hence properly Socratic, i.e., *incisively* philosophical. Meanwhile, we can also *decisively* elect to love and rejoice in all, as it is. That then is the joyful wisdom (to use a Nietzsche title).

Is it simply Nietzsche then? No. Nietzsche approved of “loving fate” (*amor fati*) as “the innocence of becoming”. However, although he wrote “the twilight of the idols” there is one idol he did not sound out sufficiently with his hammer – viz., time – perhaps because he was so caught up in becoming, i.e., evolution and the coming of the *Übermensch*. He did not manage to void the arrow of time toward a goal. Ironically, this ‘looking out for an ideal something to come that will redeem the past’ sounds...all-too-Christian for the great anti-Christian!

Time is a key dogma in Western culture, no doubt due to Christianity – what with its “second coming” scenarios – and the later influence of Hegel, Darwin, and Heidegger. It has been said that Western culture is *logocentric*, i.e., addicted to *logos* – words, theories, analysis, explanation, etc. However, we could just as soon say it is *chronocentric*, i.e., addicted to time. Emphasis is placed on history, evolution, or the *telos* of things. Even in deconstructive postmodernism we are still being advised by Jacques Derrida to focus on the future: waiting on “what is to come”.

Turn Far East though, e.g., to Zen, and we find time annulled, as is all duality, i.e., belief in separate things and times. In Zen emptiness (*mu*, *shunyata*) duality is dissolved in the *non-dual* awareness of the singular moment. Attachment to time, to everything temporal, is dropped. We go *light* in a timeless void – enlightened. We lighten up about things.

There is a joyful wisdom where we are free to play with the possibility that *the real is ideal* – even if we do not *know*, and do not *need* to know, how or why it is. After all, that we do not know and cannot explain it can also be affirmed as *ideal* – how things should be in the good whole. We can rejoice in that along with everything else.

We have, in short, arrived at an ode to joy! There is, all of a sudden, such a thing as an authentic existential *joy* in life – not mere “management of angst” (as existential psychotherapists would have it). Rather: joyful wisdom, joy in nothingness needing no reason – it being “without why”, on the other side of reason, i.e., *post-rational*. It is the joy of the free-spirited heart rather than the critical head, but where the critical head is an essential perquisite for the free-spirited heart.

We might sum the matter up with this motto from Zen Master, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi:
“From true emptiness, wondrous being.” (1)

Now, if or when we have this wondrous being, this free love, beauty, and joy “here, there and everywhere”, then life is “re-enchanted”. And that, in a nutshell, is what I mean by *Buddhist Existentialism* (dubious title of my book). (2)

7. Our Environmental Responsibility To Be Joyful Philosophers.

It is also what I mean by the environmentally responsible and sustainable good life. Only if humanity can learn how to abide in the joyful wisdom – i.e., in a meditative joy that does not depend on chasing like a slave after distractions and idols, wastefully consuming various fancy goods and services, people and places, romantic or exotic experiences, etc – can we hope that our species may learn to cease squandering the Earth’s limited resources and generally abusing the environment. As a Zen saying goes, we can learn how to “sit quietly, doing nothing” and while “doing nothing” – grasping at nothing

from the environment – abide in an empathic mind of joyful wisdom. If so, this would surely be the ethical and wise form of the good life, and the *arête* we need today.

“Do nothing to achieve everything!” – is apparently an old Chinese saying. Sounds right to me. However, people today seem hell-bent on doing something – producing and consuming – thus using up the environment to service a great many needless pursuits. This incredibly wasteful consumption is referred to as the modern consumer good life: *the temporal pursuit of happiness*. We were taught to seek it like slaves from day one.

Let’s ask, however: Can there *really* be a temporal *pursuit* of happiness at all? Is philosophy a way to *pursue* it? How about no – to both questions! Rather, the more we pursue happiness, the more we push it away from us into the future, and so deflect it, because happiness – eudemonia, actually more like joy – is accessed timelessly within, non-temporally, i.e., as immediate wisdom, enlightenment. Philosophy, then, is not to be confused with a *pursuit* of happiness. It *is* happiness.

However, as we’ve noted, philosophy usually gets dismissed nowadays as a useless discipline, e.g., at RMIT, even though RMIT also has “sustainability” in its Mission Statement. Now there’s an aporia, a self-contradiction. Well, it seems we are living in topsy-turvy land. No wonder that the planet doesn’t stand much chance.

Finally, in conclusion: to abide in ‘authentic philosophical moments’ and so live in ‘the joyful wisdom’, and to bring that joyful wisdom into our interpersonal relationships and our actions in the world – this might be viewed now as being as much an *ethical environmental sustainability* requirement as a personal *happiness* requirement. Arête/excellence is environmentally sustainable eudemonia: an inner flourishing, naturally green – an evergreen joy in every fresh moment.

The future of the planet may well depend on it.

PS.

One simple final application (from which one can generalise): I have kidney stones. They give me quite a bit of pain. But to say it is bad and unlovable is merely a prejudice. So I don’t. Nevertheless I will take the appropriate steps – ironically of course – to dissolve and eliminate them if I can. Not a problem then: the joyful wisdom remains.

1. Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, Weatherhill, Tokyo and N.Y., 1972, pg 105.
2. Robert Miller, *Buddhist Existentialism: from anxiety to authenticity and freedom*, Shogam Publications Melbourne, 2008.