
Freethought isn't Free

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THERE are those who argue that life has no intrinsic purpose; that all humanity is insignificant and impotent, and the whole existence thing is just meaningless and pointless. These are the Existential Nihilists ... pretty gloomy, huh? At the other extreme are those who believe that life is just an entrance exam for those wishing to get into Heaven, where they can spend eternity praising God hardly any better. So what *is* it all about?

Does it have to be about anything? Does every effect have to have a cause? Believers claim that God exists without ever having been created by something else, and that He created the universe – non-believers point out that if this is so, then it is equally possible, probable even, if Occam's Razor is taken into account, that the universe exists without having had to be created by God.

Once the universe existed, then, sooner or later, the evolution of primitive life on planet Earth was statistically probable given the conditions. Life forms evolved randomly in different directions ... some failed and died out, others survived and flourished. There was no particular goal or purpose in any of this.

One day, a fish with leg-like fins climbed out of the sea, and its progeny evolved to suit their new and changing environment and eventually, around a quarter of a million years ago, our human species became recognisable in Africa... and Presto! Here we are! No Creator, no cause, and no more purpose than a lump of rock. As Jakob Bronowski said "*Man is part of nature, in the sense that a stone is, or a cactus, or a camel*". Humankind is rather more complex, but is nothing special.

Yet life without purpose would be just that, and such a notion is unthinkable for most of us who have the capacity for thought and love and compassion, and the ability to appreciate beauty, justice and friendship. And so, one way or another, we each give meaning and purpose to our lives using subjective freely-chosen values to create our own personal philosophy, which we each use to set our objectives in life and thus give purpose to our existence. Most humanists try to prioritise reason and compassion. But every little thing we do is at all times an entirely free choice ... in every case we could have done otherwise, and at every turn, we are responsible for our own behaviour.

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In the mid-20th century, this line of thinking led to a popular school of thought known as Existentialism, whose best-known exponent was Jean-Paul Sartre. He emphasised that we should all be conscious that each of us is at all times perfectly free to choose what to value, how to live and what to do when faced with moral dilemmas. He reasoned that there is no objective God-given moral order independent of humanity, and therefore each of us must create his/her own set of values and standards in choosing how to live life. It is by these choices that we gradually become the people we are. We become honest by being consistently honest. We help an old lady

because we have given ourselves the goal of being someone who helps old ladies.

There is no outside reason for this behaviour, nor is there any right or wrong involved. It is simply an observation that the choices we make eventually define the sort of people we are. So those choices carry a heavy responsibility.

Most of us try to shirk this responsibility by arguing that in the real world, our choices are not free. We are predisposed to certain behaviours and moral standards by our genetic makeup, our upbringing, psychological needs, indoctrination, culture, advertising, mood, health and a host of other influences. These influences are objective factors that can be measured, and they are what Sartre called our 'facticity'.

I might claim that it is my individual facticity that predetermines and defines what sort of a person I am, but Existentialists will have none of it because, they claim, I am at all times perfectly free to decide what values to ascribe to the aspects of my facticity. I am not a victim of my facticity, and to claim otherwise would be Determinism.

Most people lead conventional lives, using ready-made values. They think and behave as if their choices have all been pre-determined by the law, good manners, societal norms and so on. Existentialists would describe such behaviour as 'inauthentic', because it doesn't acknowledge the freedom to think and behave otherwise. 'Authentic' freedom of thought is a big responsibility and a heavy burden, because it involves constant conscious choices.

In short, freethought is anything but free. □
