

MY NAME IS JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

(lecture at University of Charleston "Living Philosophy" series, Nov. 20, 1991, with speakers posing as historic thinkers.)

By James A. Haught (wearing a beret)

Good evening. My name is Jean-Paul Sartre. Students in tonight's audience may be too young to remember me, but you of middle years will recall that I caused great controversy in the era after World War II, and was the target of many denunciations.

I want to assure you that, regardless of what you've heard, my life had a beneficial goal: I sought to help people understand the reality of their individual lives amid the world's chaos and madness, and to impress upon them the importance of struggling to improve the human condition.

My message was simple: We are born into an unfathomable existence that has no discernible cosmic or divine purpose - a life often absurd or horrible - and the only valid values are the ones we create for ourselves.

Existence - the reality that engulfs us - is the heart of my philosophy of existentialism. Existence is all there is, and we must look at it with the clinical eye of the scientist.

Human behavior is a bizarre jumble of affection and hostility, greed and generosity, violence and gentleness. The Chinese concept of the yin and yang - good and evil mixed in each personality - correctly describes the human psyche. The world abounds with love, and with horror. People are capable of terrible cruelties to each other. Your modern America has 23,000 murders a year, and 100,000 rapes - mostly for no logical reason. "Hell is other people," is a key line in one of my plays.

Meanwhile, random luck governs much of life. Chance gives some people wealth, or intellect, or health - while others are born to misery and early death. By sheer accident, some are privileged Americans and some are starving Ethiopians. In the Third World, 40,000 children die of malnourishment every day, and the prosperous northern world doesn't even notice.

There is no Grand Order of life. There is no God putting people on Earth as a testing place, consigning the wicked to hell and the righteous to heaven. Such supernatural beliefs are infantile - and the fact that billions of people hold them, and worldwide churches promulgate them, merely shows the superstition of the species. (Over the centuries, millions of people have killed each other for their religious beliefs, and performed human sacrifices to non-existent gods. What further proof is needed of the insanity lurking like a monster within our kind?)

On a more logical plane, many people believe there is a "human nature," a universal essence that makes us crave kindness and renounce cruelty. But we existentialists disagree. We think people simply are born as biological creatures, and subsequent conditioning by family and culture shapes each person's nature. "Existence precedes essence" is a fundamental principle of our philosophy.

The universe is indifferent to you and me. There is no "right and wrong" apart from human needs. If Southern whites lynch a black in a tree, the tree doesn't care. If a child dies of diphtheria, it is of no concern to the diphtheria microbes. If 10,000 Macedonians in full battle array massacre occupants of a Greek city under the Mediterranean sun - or if America's "smart" bombs kill 200,000 Iraqis - the sun continues to shine on both the killers and the killed. Nature doesn't care.

Yet "right and wrong" are crucial human contrivances - agreed-upon rules to prevent pain and enhance life. What we do may not matter to the universe, but it matters to our fellows.

Since we are born into a world that has no God dictating the rules, nor even a biological essence governing behavior, every thinking person is utterly alone in choosing how to live. "Man is condemned to be free," is my phrase for this situation. Despite all the conditioning influences that shape us, it finally is up to each individual, alone, to decide his or her actions. Even when we ask others to guide us, we are making a personal choice. To ask a priest for advice is to choose religion; to ask an agnostic professor is to choose humanism. We cannot avoid choosing a course - even to do nothing is a choice. "Radical freedom" is a label applied to this condition. "There is no reality except in action," I often contended. And we cannot escape the consequences of our actions.

"Abandonment," "anguish" and "despair" are words central to atheistic existentialism - but they are not as morbid as you may think. Abandonment simply means there is no God, thus we are left alone to seek a path. Anguish is the anxiety we feel when we realize that we bear sole responsibility for our actions, and we cannot avoid acting. Despair is the realization that we can rely only upon ourselves - that others who share our beliefs may turn in directions that leave us.

Despite all the uncertainty and futility of life, every person must develop individual integrity and strive to improve the lot of humanity. There are no divine or universal laws - yet we must adopt private values, and pursue them. This is the only "authentic" life. It can be expressed this way:

---- Never stop advocating reason - even though 900 residents of Jonestown swallow cyanide and give it to their children.

---- Never stop seeking fairness and decency - even though right-wing death squads rape and decapitate women in El Salvador. (The name of the country, "The Savior," illustrates the irrationality of life.)

---- Never stop trying to resolve differences between peoples through logical negotiation - even though more than 100 local wars have been fought since World War II, with terrible suffering.

---- Never stop believing that men and women need each other, and that children need parents - even though half of marriages splinter in bitterness, and 2,000 American men beat their women to death annually.

---- Never stop supporting the freedom of people to follow whatever religion they prefer, or none - even though Shi'ite Muslims in Iran hang Baha'i teen-agers who won't convert, or Catholic terrorists machinegun Pentecostals in church in Ireland, or Sikhs assassinate Hindus to establish "the Land of the Pure."

---- Never stop seeking social justice - even though Texas policemen drown Mexicans in canals, or Los Angeles officers club black speeders.

Although we see madness and cruelty in the fabric of human living, thinking people have a duty to work incessantly to counteract them. If we fail to do so, we allow evil to prevail. Even though we know that death lies ahead for us, and we realize that all our best efforts may come to nothing, we must try. This is "engagement."

One of your modern movies, "Oh God," bore an agnostic, humanist message: The fictional creator said, "You have everything here on Earth that you need to make life good. Now it is up to you to make it work." This is the obligation of an existentialist - or any person who cares about humanity.

The foregoing summarizes the beliefs I preached in those heady postwar years. Now a word about myself, and how I came to my role:

I was born in Paris in 1905, an only child. My father, a naval officer, died when I was a baby. My mother - part of a scholarly family, and a niece of the great doctor-humanitarian-musician Albert Schweitzer - brought me to live in the home of her father, a professor at the Sorbonne.

I was small and homely, with eyes that could not focus. I had no playmates. My mother took me to parks, and we roamed from group to group, but none accepted me. Finally, I retreated to our sixth-floor apartment, "on the height where dreams dwell," and sank into the magical world of books and ideas.

I did well in school, and was chosen for the prestigious Superior Normal College in the 1920s. There, I became leader of a circle of intense students who met in my room. And it was there that I met Simone de Beauvoir, a brilliant student who had no chance to marry in bourgeois French society because her family was too poor for a dowry. She and I became lovers, and settled into a partnership that lasted throughout our lives (although I occasionally exercised an option to have "contingent loves").

I was deeply influenced by two German philosophers: Edmund Husserl, who said it is futile for philosophers to debate abstract principles, and Martin Heidegger, who saw that humans occupy an incomprehensible world, doomed to die without ever knowing why we are here.

After graduation in 1929, I taught in schools of Le Havre, Laon and finally Paris. In 1938, I published my first novel, "Nausea," the diary of a tormented man alienated from the physical world, even from his body. In 1939 I was drafted for the

new war with Germany, and spent a year in a German prison camp. Upon being freed in 1941, I resumed teaching and writing. In 1943, I published "Being and Nothingness," asserting that the mind, consisting of nothing physical, escapes the deterministic rules that apply to matter.

After the war, my teachings about the senselessness of life became an international sensation. The horrors of the war - and the systematic extermination of 6 million Jews for the "crime" of deriving from a different religious culture - were powerful proof of my message.

"When it comes to the absurdity of existence," a popular journal said, "war is a great convincer." (Yet proof had been abundant before World War II. Millions of preceding Jews had been killed by Europe's Christians - when they weren't busy killing Muslims in the Crusades, or killing fellow Christians in the Reformation, or torturing heretics in the Inquisition, or burning women in the witch-hunts. And there had been wars beyond number. Illogical savagery abounds in history.)

By the 1950s, existentialism was a world craze, changing Western culture. "Theater-of-the-absurd" plays, "anti-hero" novels, "new wave" movies and the like contradicted the traditional mythology of noble heroes defeating evil villains. The "new morality" of less-certain values invaded religion. The furor took on dimensions I scarcely recognized, and which I disowned.

I ceased teaching and spent the rest of my life writing. I continued my exhortations for engagement. I advocated a form of Marxism as the best plan for human welfare - yet I refused to join the French communist party and was horrified by Soviet cruelties. The world craze faded, and my influence diminished. It resurged briefly in 1964 when I was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature - but I rejected it, the only person ever to do so, because it represented the bourgeois trappings of success I had long opposed. "A writer must refuse to allow himself to be transformed into an institution," I told the Nobel committee.

In the 1970s, my faulty eyesight failed entirely, my health deteriorated, and I lost the ability to write. "I have lost my reason for being," I told friends. The end came in 1980, at age 74. I hope that I have left behind a basic truth for others to understand. I never preached despair, or felt it, although the vocabulary of existentialism is gloomy. I advocated courageous action seeking to triumph over the abyss. I leave you with a summary thought:

"Man can count on no one but himself; he is alone, abandoned on Earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets for himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on this Earth."

(Haught is editor emeritus of West Virginia's largest newspaper, The Charleston Gazette-Mail. He may be reached by phone at 304-348-5199 or e-mail at haught@wvgazette.com. This lecture was included in his 2007 book, "Honest Doubt." His personal website is <http://haught.net>.)