

# Some thoughts on the nature and pervasiveness of existentialism

 Posted on 2 December 2010 by [cjf](#)

Recently I had occasion to speculate that **existentialism** may be characterized as *a thread of thought that advocates and honors the individual's unrestrained freedom of choice in building meaning, defining personal responsibility and formulating personal authenticity* in a [discussion](#) at the [Ben Franklin Thinking Society](#).

Existentialism does not seem to provide a world view or school of philosophy since the thread of thought that it represents has been incorporated by various thinkers into philosophical systems of diverse and even conflicting character (from fascism to socialism to communism to objectivism; from Kierkegaard to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Ayn Rand, and Simone de Beauvoir). So the way in which the honored values of “existentialism” are developed and expressed varies considerably from thinker to thinker. I conclude it is an element of philosophy and not a philosophy unto itself.

I note there are some existentialist threads in Buckminster Fuller's thinking. Bucky's title “No More Secondhand God” suggests that the individual should build their own personal God. The following quote speaks deeply about authenticity, personal meaning and [cosmic responsibility](#):

The things to do are: the things that need doing: that you see need to be done, and that no one else seems to see need to be done. Then you will conceive your own way of doing that which needs to be done — that no one else has told you to do or how to do it. This will bring out the real you that often gets buried inside a character that has acquired a superficial array of behaviors induced or imposed by others on the individual.

— R. Buckminster Fuller, Critical Path

The discussion group felt, and I will also speculate, that some degree of honoring freedom of choice in building meaning and personal responsibility are evident in most thinkers today. Witness the expression “personal relationship with God” which would put an existentialist garb on Christianity. History suggests that before the modern era family, profession, religion, economic status, crown and country precluded an individual interpretation of life's mysteries. So it may be that existentialist thinking is a new way of thinking characteristic of modernity. Now, it seems existentialist thinking has become omni-present. Is that because of or in spite of the fact that most of us have little evident bearing on the events that comprise most “news” stories?

Frankly, I do not know that much about existentialism, so I'm wondering what others can add to my characterization and speculations? How would we measure or demonstrate that existentialism has become pervasive in modern thinking? When did the trend start? Are there any who still think of the individual as just a cog in the wheels of bigger forces and not an active builder of their own reality? Or was existentialism prevalent in pre-modern thinking too and I just haven't yet tuned into its historical threads ([the Wikipedia article on existentialism](#) suggests that the Buddha, Saint Augustine, and even Hamlet exhibited existentialist thinking, but pre-moderns may have had just a flicker of insight with no real consciousness of the modern sense of individualism)?

Please let me know your thoughts on these questions in the comments. Thanks.

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## 11 Responses to “Some thoughts on the nature and pervasiveness of existentialism”

1. [Kirby Uerner](#) on 2 December 2010 at 8:05 pm

Interesting questions Chris. I think of existentialism as a response to World War 1 in particular, and to the surreal nature of having these new technological terrors, such as bombers, nerve gas, land mines, moving on to submarines...

Not that any of these were entirely without precedent. Existentialism grew up in a coffee shops culture, in France especially, in an attempt to heal from this nauseating war and avoid another one. The movement was unsuccessful in this regard.



A central tenet of existentialism is that humans are responsible for their own humanity, for defining what it means to be human. Fuller assigns humans a default role of information harvester and problem solver, as agents of eternally regenerative Universe.

As we fall away from that role (if we do, choosing oblivion over utopia), it's not clear to me whether Fuller continues to see us as fully human. There's a lot

between the lines in 'Critical Path' etc. about "devolution" i.e. becoming ever more specialized and therefore more and more ape like. Planet of the Apes R Us in that case.

In this sense, Fuller might have considered humans to have an essential nature or design (unlike the existentialists), but like the existentialists he offered no guarantee that we'd remain authentic or true to this essence.

"Losing our humanity" remained a real possibility in his philosophy. 'Grunch of Giants' was something of a cliff-hanger in that regard.

Two recent movies that have strong existentialist themes and might be viewed in juxtaposition therefore are 'Hurt Locker' and 'Jarhead'. Here's a link to my review of the former, which links to my review of the latter:

<http://controlroom.blogspot.com/2010/11/hurt-locker-movie-review.html>

Kirby

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2. **D W Jacobs** on 2 December 2010 at 10:02 pm

Hi CJ. Hi Kirby. Interesting posts! Existentialism seems to have gained in popularity after WWI with a new and specifically absurdist spin. However, the roots of it seem to go back to a 19th C. disillusionment with the Romantic movement and its melodramatic relationship to Idealism. I find Bucky's spin on this closer to the American Transcendentalists. A recent book (American Transcendentalism, A History, by Philp F. Gura) seems to define them as a group of thinkers who agreed to completely disagree with each other while also agreeing to continue the conversation. I clearly see existential elements in the Buddha, Shakespeare and Dostoevski. I'm not sure I see existentialism in Augustine except as something he escaped. He satiated himself on existence and wordly experiences to the point of exhaustion, and then had a psychological and/or spiritual reaction that took him back to individual spiritual experience, ending with neo-platonic insights. Wasn't that it? I haven't read him in quite some time, so I'm not sure I have this right.



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3. **Roger Tobie** on 3 December 2010 at 11:24 am

Hello, All, While Googling "existentialism" (which I find almost impossible to spell) I came across this



"I. Absolute Individuality and Absolute Freedom.

The Existentialist conceptions of freedom and value arise from their view of the individual. Since we are all ultimately alone, isolated islands of subjectivity in an objective world, we have absolute freedom over our internal nature, and the source of our value can only be

internal.”

Well, from my personal point of view I am not ultimately alone, I am not an isolated island of subjectivity in an objective world. It seems to me that this extreme view of things arises from accepting the Cartesian split of “soul or self” versus an inanimate, dead, material/mechanistic world. It is a form of dualism, the so called mind body split. But, and I emphasize that this is based on my personal experience, I find I am connected to everything in the Universe (sorry Bucky, I am not going to write universe without the definite article). I am an integral part of the whole universe. Do I therefore “believe” in God? No, I certainly don’t believe. Do I experience something that some people have chosen to call God. Sure. So what? I certainly cannot prove this to anyone else. In that sense I’m alone.

It is written that when the Buddha was asked by someone or other about God, his reply was, “We don’t talk about God. We have other much more immediate problems to deal with such as alleviating suffering.” Actually he talked about pulling arrows out of peoples backs. He was speaking metaphorically. It is also claimed that he asserted that no one should believe anything he said. Rather they should practice certain practices (which he specified) so that they can experience it directly for themselves. . . whatever it is. I suppose this could be considered a form of Existentialism. Hey, Baby! Do you want enlightenment? It’s up to you, I, The Buddha, cannot do it for you. Neither can anyone else. With this I heartily concur.

I relish a quote I heard from the Dalai Lama when he was addressing a large audience, “I have nothing to offer you.” I don’t suppose too many people caught the double-entendre of nothing = No Thing. It was pretty funny and pretty sly. It still makes me chuckle.

Roger

[Reply](#)

4. [Dick Fischbeck](#) on 3 December 2010 at 8:53 pm



Pardon me, but if existentialism doesn’t move needles, how can we use it? Let’s get back to artifacts. Or, at least, how does existentialism connect with forward days of life support. I don’t see it.

[Reply](#)

5. [Dick Fischbeck](#) on 3 December 2010 at 8:58 pm

Oops.



Hi Roger!

[Reply](#)

6. [Kirby Urner](#) on 3 December 2010 at 9:13 pm



Hey DW, great to get your perspective. So is American Transcendentalism, as distinct from New England’s, finally gathering steam, and is Bucky among them? I’ve been working to bridge said AT to the Gothics, via Poe’s Eureka

(Applewhite's link), and to Quakers. I take it back to Nietzsche via Norman O. Brown. St. Augustine is my segue to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who creates a space for Synergetics-style "operational mathematics" (meaning through use, with gestalt switches proving you "got it" — a bridge to Zen).

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7. **justintruth** on 16 December 2010 at 6:01 pm



I don't think existentialism even registers compared to nihilism. Most people still think that trying to understand too much leads nowhere because there isn't any where there to lead to. They think they already know as much as you can on philosophical issues and "eggheads" only think they need more. My understanding is that Nietzsche believed that there would not be an "answer" to philosophy, rather people would just increasingly find it irrelevant and they would find that because there is no possibility for meaning but rather its kind of a aesthetic decision one makes. There is a similar idea with contemporary art with a lot of people thinking its meaningless.

[Reply](#)

8. **cjf** on 16 December 2010 at 8:59 pm

Kirby, DW, Roger, Dick, Justintruth,

I'll try respond to everyone in one comment.

The existentialist thread in Augustine is described in the reference given by Wikipedia:

[St. Augustine, especially in his Confessions exhibited a great concern for himself in the face of God. The work abounds in a dynamic and healthy self-interest which humbly lays itself before, and submits to, the will of God. Augustine sifts through his life before his conversion and analyzes it, all the while carrying on a conversation with God in the present. His grief over the time he stole from someone's orchard is vivid and personal. The Confessions is still read today as a frank and vital existential work.](#)



As Kirby, DW, and Roger hint: Bucky was not a strong existentialist. Although he valued the individual and there are other existentialist threads in his thinking, it is clear that, as Kirby suggests, he thought "eternally regenerative Universe" was a higher purpose (see my post on that subject: <https://blog.cjfeanley.com/2010/11/19/a-cosmic-speculation-about-the-purpose-of-humans-in-universe/>). That takes Bucky beyond existentialism. If Humans choose Oblivion then, I think, Bucky suggests that Universe will use one of its other options for regenerativity (maybe the Bonobo, [http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/susan\\_savage\\_rumbaugh\\_on\\_apes\\_that\\_write.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/susan_savage_rumbaugh_on_apes_that_write.html), can take our place or perhaps porpoises, if the oceans survive?).

DW, I can see a proto-existentialist thread in American Transcendentalism. That is an interesting link (for existentialism and for Bucky). Gura's book is partly

browsable at <http://books.google.com/books?isbn=0809034778>

Roger's comment reminded me of this "anti-existentialist" Bucky poem:

Cosmic Plurality

Environment to each must be  
All there is, that isn't me.  
Universe in turn must be  
All that isn't me AND ME.

Since I only see inside of me  
What brain imagines outside me,  
It seems to be you may be me.  
If that is so, there's only we.

Me and we, too  
Which love makes three,  
Universe  
Perme-embracing  
It-Them-You-and-We.

Dick, I think words and thoughts are artifacts too. Understanding the interrelationships among historical movements and figures can help us understand where our ideas come from. I like the way Kitty Foyle, the main character in Christopher Morley's great novel, put it:

I've taught myself a lesson, or I hope I have: when I find myself thinking something I stop a minute and ask myself, Now who had it all figured out beforehand that was the way they wanted me to think?

Justintruth, I think meaning is deeply important to all people. To me the problem is people taking second-hand meanings from others (see that great Kitty Foyle quote above). I value the process of questioning meaning and building it anew for myself and to share with others. So maybe there is a bit of an existentialist thread in my own thinking ...

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9. [Dick Fischbeck](#) on 17 December 2010 at 9:20 pm



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asqd1H4lluQ>

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10. [Roger Tobie](#) on 19 December 2010 at 6:25 pm



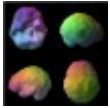
I found the youtube video posted above delightful. Who is that talking? Alan Watts? I like that (whoever it was) said the Universe is playful, simply playful. It is not serious, trying to get somewhere. That was very refreshing. I guess it was Dick Fischbeck who posted the link to the video. Thank you, Dick.

[Reply](#)

11. [Joshua Pang](#) on 19 December 2010 at 9:57 pm

Besides immense homage to Critical Path and my own relationship with my copy, “Just do it” – Nike

Existentialism is a thread of thought that acknowledges the eternal now and that “judgement” comes at every moment.



OH yeah btw, just to make a “down-payment” on a potential afterimage, I’d thinking about UPenn and Sanskrit for Undergrad and Grad, and basically I’m going to be in the Philadelphia area soon enough and I should like to attend a BFTS meeting and work some of what we’ve been teaming — in person.

Sending the good vibes,  
J

[Reply](#)

12.