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The Human Condition as Literature

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The Human Condition as Literature

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“A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence.”

—Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth*

Introduction

Since its emergence in the 19th century, existentialism has found expression in both literary prose and traditional philosophical analysis, with many of its most notable thinkers experimenting with both. In this paper, I will argue that the former is more capable of penetrating the essence of the existential crisis than the latter, examining the nature of each and their respective methodologies in the pursuit of insight into this enigmatic subject matter.

Before I begin my assessment, I think it is important to clear up two potential areas of ambiguity: (1) to define more concretely what I mean by (i) “literary prose” and (ii) “philosophical analysis”, and (2) to briefly summarize the nature of the existential crisis.

1. (i) When speaking of literary prose, I mean the use of rhetoric and verse as a means of creative expression. This does not necessarily have to follow any sort of pre-determined metrical arrangement or narrative structure; it simply must retain a focus on eloquence and in most cases, brevity. (ii) In contrast, philosophical analysis is characterized by a cold and rigorous scrutiny of its chosen subject; writers in this style typically try to avoid personality in favor of the pursuit of objectivity. Philosophical texts are often much lengthier, and include acknowledgements of potential disagreements and the presentation of appropriate rebuttals. An example of the latter is the paper presented here,

albeit far less meticulous than is generally found in traditional philosophical analysis.

2. The existential crisis, or existentialism as a whole, arose with humanity's growing dissatisfaction with the idea of blind faith to an omnipotent god. The subsequent removal of a divine benchmark resulted in feelings of desperation and meaninglessness, as the insignificance of human life now seemed inescapable. This loss of direction and realization that the whole of life is seemingly without purpose is the foundation of the existential crisis.

Literary vs. Philosophical Approaches in Existentialist thought

Often considered the "father of existentialism", Søren Kierkegaard gave birth to the philosophical movement with his analysis of the role of Christianity in a world quickly becoming engulfed by scientism. He asserted that rationality alone cannot lead to a comprehension of an existence that is ultimately absurd, and that the only method one has of creating meaning in one's life is to act in accordance with God's will. This idea of the individual as a meaning-creating agent marks the birth of existentialism, and is representative of Kierkegaard's remarkably avant-garde philosophical sensibilities. His insight into the insignificance of human life and the fundamental predicament that invariably follows set the groundwork for future analysis of the human condition, and although later existentialist thought bases itself on a heavily atheistic foundation, the movement's first footsteps were taken in the shoes of a devout and humble Christian.

An investigation into Kierkegaard's thought reveals efforts in both the refined academic scrutiny of traditional philosophical analysis as well as the eloquence and creative liberation of literary prose. His insights into the nature of the self, a topic of extensive debate not only in existentialism but in philosophy as a whole, can be found in both forms, albeit with very different explanatory results. The former, as we will see below, is almost unintelligible - an extremely convoluted articulation that will undoubtedly appear opaque to those not used to the syntactic density typical of philosophical texts. Kierkegaard defines the self as the following:

The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation [which accounts for it] that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but [consists in the fact] that the relation relates itself to its own self. (Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death* 9)

Here, Kierkegaard's ludicrous repetition borders on total inaccessibility; the abuse of technical terms is philosophical analysis pushed to its extreme, carving out an intellectual chasm between Kierkegaard and his readers. This chasm begins to shrink, however, with the introduction of literary techniques. Exploring the topic of the self in an entirely different manner, Kierkegaard warns:

The greatest hazard of all, losing one's self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss - an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. - is sure to be noticed. (32)

One need not be extensively familiar with the works of Kierkegaard to recognize the divergence in communicative efficiency between these two passages. Each calls for multiple readings, but for entirely different reasons; the former in pursuit of mere comprehension, the latter to deepen the search for subjective applicability. The respective rhetorical methodologies are the source of these differences in efficiency and personal resonance, and later philosophers discerned and eventually employed these differences to their interpretive advantage. As a result, a more literary approach was taken by many in their philosophical works who sought its sentimentality and interpretive potential.

Despite his severe criticism of Kierkegaard's beloved Christianity, Nietzsche shares with him an integral role in the development of existentialist thought. In a career that spanned the latter half of the 19th century, Nietzsche provided unprecedented insight into many of the problems of the human condition, and did so through a modus operandi that bridged the gap between traditional philosophical analysis and literary prose. He remained fairly steadfast to this unique rhetorical style, and because of this, his work does not contain the glaring methodological dichotomy that we find in Kierkegaard. Instead, we discover the rebellious philosophy of a man with exceptional allegorical and hyperbolic sensibilities. His magnum opus, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, although driven by a traditional linear narrative, is at once a mystical parable, a philosophical treatise, and a work of poetry. *Zarathustra* provides an incredibly intimate encounter with the existential crisis, and although most remembered for its declaration of the death of God, the book is full of provocative aphorisms regarding this new predicament of humanity. His famous prophecy that "mankind is something that shall be overcome" and that "it is the overman which shall be the meaning of the earth!" gets to the heart of the existential crisis: the absurdity of man's existence and his ensuing responsibility to define himself (Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* 3). The human condition cannot be encapsulated with this level of explanatory magnitude through the means of

conventional philosophical critique; it requires instead the lucid and nuanced rhetorical embellishment characteristic of Nietzsche.

Perhaps the most significant popularizer of existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre also employed both critical analysis and literary prose in his investigation into the philosophical movement. His speech entitled *Existentialism is a Humanism* is responsible for arguably the most cogent definition of existentialism's main idea: that "existence precedes essence". Although found in the context of an exclusively philosophical work, Sartre's definition is pure poetry; the brevity with which he is able to sum up existentialism's entire conceptual foundation proves that syntactic economy serves well he who seeks to grasp the paradoxical obscurity of the philosophy. An investigation into Sartre's fiction reveals further existential acuity, particularly in his 1938 novel *Nausea*. The novel's protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, serves as a surrogate for the individual faced with the existential crisis, expressing in daily journals his growing repulsion at his own existence. Roquentin covers the existential crisis from all angles, articulating its conception, the perpetual hold it develops, as well the change in relation it causes between a man and the external physical world. Putting an existential twist on Descartes' *cogito*, Roquentin broods:

I exist because I think... and I can't stop myself from thinking. At this very moment - it's frightful - if I exist, it is because I am horrified at existing. I am the one who pulls myself from the nothingness to which I aspire.

(Sartre, *Nausea* 31)

Here we have an examination of the self not from outside the existential crisis like we saw in Kierkegaard, but from deep within it. This intimacy with one's own anguish is quintessential to the existential crisis, and its exposition is something Sartre truly excels at. Our image of existentialism not only as a school of thought, but as an emotional state of being would not be what it is today if it were not for his exceptional literary abilities.

"Meaning", and its place in Philosophy and Literature

At this point I feel it is necessary to change course in the methodology of my argument from observation to theorization. Allow me to summarize: I have henceforth claimed that literary prose is more instrumentally apt to penetrating the essence of the existential crisis than traditional philosophical analysis. By referencing works of several eminent existentialist thinkers, I have sought to provide examples of exceptional insight into both the emergence and the composition of its crisis,

demonstrating the philosophical capacity of prose in conveying the feelings most central to existentialism. However, I have not made any substantial claim as to why I believe this to be the case; I have not investigated with any amount of depth the relationship between the respective natures of literary prose, traditional philosophical analysis, and the existential crisis. This investigation will comprise the remainder of the paper.

As stated earlier, the crux of the existential crisis is the individual's realization that existence is without meaning; a realization that is typically succeeded by feelings of despair and a general indifference towards life. The differences in ability of the two methods of philosophical expression in communicating this central point hinges on their ontological interpretation of "meaning", both as a word and as an element of human existence. Philosophical analysis seems to operate under the idea that meaning is found in words, and words alone. This method's obsession with consistency, citation, and intellectual diligence requires a departure from the mental autonomy that constitutes most of what can be thought of as our "day to day" lives into a headspace much more linear and consciously-focused.

For example, one could not possibly comprehend Kierkegaard's tangled definition of the self we saw earlier without an exhaustive level of intellectual patience and rigor – faculties typically unemployed to that extent in the day to day. This distance between the day to day and the philosophically critical is what renders traditional analysis inferior to literary prose in terms of relating the existential crisis. The existential crisis is, by its very nature, concerned *exclusively* with the day to day; it is the dissatisfaction with life that arises not from extensive critical analysis, but from the moment in which certain death makes itself known on a profoundly sentimental level. Literary prose is capable of penetrating this dissatisfaction because its idea of meaning (and consequently, its expression of the loss of it) parallels that of the day to day. In literature, as in the day to day, "meaning" means something akin to "purpose" or "function" - not "definition." The existential crisis occurs when one realizes that life *has no ultimate purpose*; a feeling which literary prose therefore has a greater capacity to convey than philosophical analysis.

Conclusion

Although my examination of the practices of traditional philosophical analysis and literary prose has been far from exhaustive, I believe it is comprehensive enough to justify my conclusion; namely, that literary prose as a vehicle for expression is more apt to the challenge of penetrating the essence of the

existential crisis than the critical methods conventional of philosophy. As we have seen, this is based on a fundamental difference in their respective positions on meaning, and its role for man in a world no longer governed exclusively by religious dogma. The existential crisis finds an ontologically kindred spirit in the eloquence and subtlety of literary prose; the likeness of which cannot be equaled by the logical tyranny of traditional philosophical analysis. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre all understood this, and it drove them to expand the scope of their thought beyond the strict standards characteristic of the methodology employed by conventional philosophy and into a realm altogether more intimate with the human condition.

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Derek Kanowsky is currently studying philosophy at San Francisco State University. Within the subject, his focus is the epistemological implications of Existentialism and its close relative, Absurdism. His areas of interest include Existentialism, Cultural Studies, Literature and Film.