The Logical Positivism of A. J. Ayer and
the Existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre:
Truth, Meaning and Value in the Twentieth Century

Throughout history truth and value have been founded on a variety of absolute principles; two of the most influential have been belief in the commandments of an infinite and eternal God and trust in the conclusions of empirical science. Whereas traditional religious belief has supplied only a simplistic solution to moral dilemmas, i.e. an action is either good or bad because God says so, science seems to have abandoned moral questions entirely and to have concerned itself only with empirically verifiable facts. With religious belief increasingly under siege from the advances made by science, where does that leave ethics and morality? What is truth? What is the meaning and purpose of life? Are ethics possible in a world where God is dead? Among the various approaches to the dilemma created by the supremacy of science and the corresponding doubt in the literal meaning of religious doctrine that emerged in the twentieth century, the logical positivism of A. J. Ayer and the existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre each stake a claim for ethical thought in a universe devoid of moral certitude.

Ayer belongs to the school of thought called logical positivism, which holds that the only valid way to acquire knowledge of the external world is through application of the scientific method. A requirement of this theory is that for a statement of fact to be genuine, it must be possible to verify it through "sense-experience." All propositions which cannot satisfy the verification principle set up to test the validity of empirical hypotheses are deemed metaphysical and are thus neither true nor false, and therefore meaningless. Ayer holds that ethical statements fall into this category because the ethical symbol used adds nothing to the factual content. Words like "good" or "wrong" only express moral approval or disapproval. They cannot be defined in any empirical sense. Thus, ethical statements are mere "pseudo-concepts" (107) and do not fall under the category of truth or falsehood.

Based on his definition of truth, Ayer denies that any knowledge of a transcendent reality is possible and dismisses religious claims and any other empirically unverifiable propositions as metaphysics. The logical result of this is a radical dismissal of philosophy in its entirety. Rather than dealing with questions of ethics as they apply to the difficult task of living life, or exploring the nature of reality through and beyond perception, Ayer reduces the function of philosophy to clarifying propositions by showing their logical relationships and by defining the symbols which occur in them (32).

While Ayer's logical progression of thought and accuracy with language is convincing, something does not ring true in his assertion that truth is determined by how propositions are validated, which seems to say that all that is true can be ascribed to facts observed or sensed in the external world. This proscribes too narrow a field for the definition of what is fact. A reliance on what can be empirically verified as true or dismissed as false disregards the limitations of our sense experience and cuts off inquiry as to what it is to perceive. Ayer seems to arbitrarily make a decision about what facts are and how they are validated and then make the world align with his theory. And his reliance on the logic of language could easily be used against him; how different are the sentences "God exists." And "Electrons exist."? I can see neither and if I can argue that electrons can be shown to exist by measurable manifestations of their presence in the

world, can I not make the same argument for God? Ayer also remains silent on the fact that all language is symbolic and therefore inadequate to describe all of reality. Language selectively abstracts out elements in reality from those that can be perceived, but only incompletely captures the complexity and richness of existence. Finally, in denying that the phenomena of moral experience can be used to support a metaphysical doctrine of any sort, Ayer fails to sufficiently address the fact that all humans none the less do experience such phenomena and that powerful concepts such as "good" and "bad," "love" and "beauty" must signify something more than "I approve" or "I disapprove." If that is all they signified, simple phrases saying as much would suffice and render unnecessary moral symbols. While Ayer leaves such questions to the social sciences, the line he draws between the external and internal is overly arbitrary and dualistic.

If Ayer's logical empiricism loses us in the ether regions of intellectual thought, Sartre's existentialism sounds like conventional wisdom so pervasive has his influence been. In his essay "Existentialism is a Humanism" Sartre outlines his main themes of personal responsibility, choice, freedom and commitment to action in a universe of men.

Existentialism begins with the idea that "existence precedes essence," that humans are thrown into the world like so many unformed lumps of clay and that what we are is only what we make of ourselves. We are the masters of our fate. There is no supreme artisan who has conceived us and made of us mere predetermined reactions to events and environment. There is no such thing as human nature because each human makes of his nature what he wills. In short, we are not predetermined; we are free. If this freedom carries with it the price of despair, anxiety and abandonment of hope in anything outside ourselves, it also liberates us to make a life of our choosing.

For Sartre freedom is tied to the sense of profound responsibility we feel in making decisions and performing actions that stand not only as standards of our own behavior but models for the behavior of mankind as a whole. And herein lies Sartre's morality. Far from dismissing the solidarity of mankind, a basic criticism of existentialism (Sartre 346), Sartre's principle promotes a reciprocal community of individuals who are defined by their commitments to themselves and by extension to all of humanity. Sartre insists that each of us distinguish between the *en-soi,* of being which rests in itself and the *pour-soi*, of being which is aware of itself (Kaufman 43). We must recognize that we do not exist the same way a table exists, that we have a choice in how we act. We act in bad faith when we deceive ourselves into thinking we have no choice, that we are the pawn of circumstances. We become then no better than cowards and scum (Sartre 366). For Sartre what matters is not that we always make the right choice or the good choice but that we freely make choices and that we strive towards authenticity, but always with the awareness that we act for ourselves and for others.

Sartre's position presents several problems and critics have been swift to condemn the theory as overly preoccupied with the "mean, sordid, or base," with the "ignominious" in the human situation (Sartre 345). While Sartre does not minimize the absurdity and tragedy of man's condition, he offers, as Kaufman points out, a new vision of man that insists on integrity, nobility and valor (Kaufman 47). Moreover, he insists on the relevance of ideas to life. Sartre is not simply expounding a clever theory; he is offering a guide, based on his own experiences, of how to live an authentic life. Another pressing ethical question arises from Sartre's assertion that values are to be found only in one's self, that we make our values as we go along, and that freedom is the foundation of

all values (Sartre 366). Some have interpreted this to mean that we can then act as we please, no matter how evil or selfish, as long as we live an authentic and free life. Sartre's dictum that we choose human nature for all of humanity and not just for ourselves precludes this interpretation, however, and as Davis Banach observes in his lecture, "Summary of Some Main Points from Sartre's *Existentialism and Human Emotions*," our actions, though free and not governed by any rules are not completely arbitrary. They are "constrained by the choices we and others make."

Both Ayer's and Sartre's philosophies have much to offer the twenty-first century thinking man and woman. Ayer offers us the certitude of fact and science – the possibility of truth through a rigorous analysis of ideas. This is compelling, but too narrow in defining what is meaningful. Sartre presents us with the possibility of finding meaning and authenticity in a cold and indifferent cosmos. Because life is not as clean as Ayer's theory suggests, Sartre, in providing us with some moral direction, responds to our gut need for answers to real human dilemmas. Ultimately Sartre is the more hopeful for whereas Ayer deals with reality as it is, Sartre presents a vision for the future. Still, both offer alternatives to metaphysical systems which we are less and less able to reconcile with reality as it is revealed through quantum physics, cosmology, brain science and other fields of human inquiry. Kaufman is correct in concluding that it is unlikely that the thought of existentialists and analysts can be synthesized in a cohesive whole. But it is to be hoped that, as Kaufman suggests, there will be in the future of humankind philosophers who can think "in the tension between analysis and existentialism" (51) and who can deal with the big questions of humankind without sacrificing the intellectual integrity and clarity that science has taught us all to expect.

Works Cited

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