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Existentialism, Anarchism, and the Revolution

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Human or Humanity? This – the relationship between the individual and society – has been the foundational dilemma by which all systems of organization have emerged. One such approach to this dilemma is existentialism, a radically individualistic view of mankind, or so it appears. As compelling as existentialism is, for some, it fails to properly take into account the social aspect of human existence, especially with its oppositional nature towards traditional morality and the social group. For revolutionary ideas such as communism and anarchism, this issue comes to the forefront: for in a world of equality and community values, how could every individual disregard the whole? This concern is certainly reasonable, but diving deeper into existentialist philosophy reveals more complex truths about existentialism and its relation to individualism, particularly illustrated through the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Nietzsche and Emerson's philosophies provide important insights on hierarchy, morality, and an individual's place in society that are highly applicable to anarchist revolutionary thought.

Nietzsche is the hardest nut to crack. Analyzing his political ideas has notoriously led to harmful results (to say the least). As an amoralist, it's difficult to discern what, if any, of his philosophy is beneficial in political theory. To start, Nietzsche's philosophy centers on his idea of master and slave morality. Essentially, master morality is "value-creating," wherein one has power over oneself rather than reliance on external values and morality which hinder one's

freedom.¹ Slave morality, alternatively, relies on external values for validation and comfort from suffering. Modern society is consumed by this slave morality, Nietzsche stipulates – the majority of people are weak, unfree, and driven by pity. Nietzsche despises the ‘common man,’ and believes that men must become masters over themselves by rejecting the herd and forging their own path. Extrapolating this to political theory, it’s clear that if Nietzsche were to imagine a society compelled by communal values, he would think of this as a type of slave mentality: “All community makes men – somehow, somewhere, sometime ‘common.’”² Despite his abandonment of social organization, Nietzsche and anarchists share a common target: hierarchy. Fundamentally, Nietzsche’s amorality arises in the idea that slave morality exists *as* hierarchy, or perhaps *through* hierarchy. The common man attaches “no other value to himself than his masters attached to him,” for in the absence of value creation, there must inherently arise a certain authority over the common man – a value-creating class and a value-following class are necessitated, hence hierarchy.³ To be a slave is to derive one’s values from an external authority, whereas a master is his own authority.

How does anarchism avoid this pitfall of social organization? Is it not the case that without the State, the new ‘authority’ simply becomes the majority social group? This is a difficult idea and one that many anarchists must struggle with. However, an answer can be derived in precisely how such an ‘authority’ operates. Values – ideals, ways of life, the idea of *good* and *bad* – these will always exist. Nietzsche is not opposed to the existence of values; he is opposed to how these values are *created*. Fundamental to anarchism is that these values are not

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Peter Gay, “What is Noble,” *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, Translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Modern Library, 2000, 395.

² Nietzsche, “What is Noble,” 416.

³ Nietzsche, “What is Noble,” 399.

enforced. Common values and social consequences will still exist, but this is only natural, not systematic – there is no jail, no eternal damnation, no stoning, no exile – there is no punishment. Authority must sustain itself by enacting punishment. A general justification of punishment is that it serves the purpose of evoking guilt in the wrongdoer, in order to better them. Nietzsche, however, believes that punishment “tames men, but it does not make them ‘better’ – one might even assert the opposite.”⁴ Nietzsche makes clear that punishment is the mechanism for imposing power; more fundamentally, punishment is the ultimate enforcer of slave morality. Men are not free to create their own values – they are instead impelled by fear of punishment to follow the values of the authority.

Nietzsche’s philosophy centers on ‘the will to power,’ but this can easily be misunderstood as asserting power over *others*; in fact, it means power over oneself. Nietzsche emphasizes one’s internal life; society, religion, and the State, which he commonly criticizes, emphasize external life. To expand on this, Nietzsche points out that “this need to direct one’s view outward instead of back to oneself – is of the essence of *ressentiment*.” Ressentiment, so called, is essential to slave mentality, which “always first needs a hostile external world.”⁵ Nietzsche, of course, takes an entirely inward approach to this idea, and he is not necessarily wrong. The individual himself must destroy his feeling of resentment, because oppression is merely external and so has no real power over oneself. However, an anarchist would contend that if oppression leads to resentment and slave morality, it seems also true that to actually eradicate the oppression itself within the external world would be to necessarily focus attention inward. Under hierarchy, the oppressed ask “why am I unhappy?” and they blame the oppressive world.

⁴ Nietzsche, “Second Essay, Section 12,” 519.

⁵ Nietzsche, “First Essay, Section 10,” 473.

But without oppression, if one asks “why am I unhappy?” they have only themselves to blame. This only applies generally, however, for it would be foolish to pretend that doing away with hierarchy would also do away with slave morality in such an instantaneous fashion. Master morality cannot be ensured, and especially not enforced. Individuals must gain power over themselves, only for themselves, and only through themselves – only then will Nietzsche's *Übermensch* become reality. The role of society, then, should be to craft the best conditions for this, and if so, then society must be a place of freedom for the individual. As famous anarchist thinker Emma Goldman pointed out, Nietzsche “is decried as a hater of the weak because he believed in the *Übermensch*. It does not occur to the shallow interpreters of that giant mind that this vision of the *Übermensch* also called for a state of society which will not give birth to a race of weaklings or slaves.”⁶ Masters must emerge from a different set of circumstances than those of modern society, of which all are entrenched, from birth till death, in hierarchical systems of power that enforce slave morality.

However, the fundamental challenge remains – how does a society, a community, balance its own needs with that of the individual? Where does the individual fit in? Nietzsche believes that community makes people ‘common.’ But, unfortunately for Nietzscheans, all people must nonetheless live in a community. We cannot all stow away in the mountains like Zarathustra, instead, a balance must be reached. Isolation contradicts what it means to be human; we are social creatures. We cannot form our own selves without the influence of others, and besides, what does forming our own morality even mean if we exclude others from it?

⁶ Goldman, Emma, and Hippolyte Havel, “Preface,” *Anarchism and Other Essays*, The Anarchist Library, February 15, 2009.

In his essay *Society and Solitude*, Emerson sees the synthesis of the individual and social order where Nietzsche did not, providing one of the better existentialist visions of community life. Emerson parallels Nietzsche's idea that the problem with society is when it comes at the cost of the individual, when it corrupts a man's character and makes him 'common.' However, Emerson also recognizes the importance of society and the balance that must be reached between the individual and the group: "Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal. We must keep our head in the one and our hands in the other."⁷ Conformity is suicide, he thinks, but one must still participate and contribute to society. He further stipulates in *Self-Reliance* that "your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation."⁸ With this distinction, Emerson fully dispels the idea that existentialism preaches a political form of individualism, or even an amorality, in fact, Emerson champions good character and concern for others.

In this context, Nietzsche's call to go beyond morality can be interpreted, not as shunning morality, necessarily, but *transcending* it. As Emma Goldman says, "'Beyond good and evil' means beyond prosecution, beyond judging, beyond killing," it is "understanding of all others who are unlike ourselves, who are different."⁹ Emerson's vision of existentialism is a vision of great individuals, who don't just live for themselves, but create a better world in their greatness. Through truth, through relating inwards rather than outwards, 'immoral' acts become both useless and harmful. This last note becomes clear through Nietzsche's idea that evil arises from an individual's "need to create a memory for himself."¹⁰ Essentially, the desire to affirm themselves *externally* rather than *internally* is what leads to evil. Hence Emerson's idea that "the

⁷ Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "Society and Solitude," *The Portable Emerson*, Edited by Jeffrey S. Cramer, New York: Penguin Books, 2014, 568.

⁸ Emerson, 163.

⁹ Goldman, Emma, "Jealousy: Causes and a Possible Cure," The Anarchist Library, March 16, 2009.

¹⁰ Nietzsche, "Second Essay, Section 3," 497.

wise man is the State,” for “the appearance of character makes the State unnecessary.”¹¹

Existentialism, by focusing inwardly, becomes the ultimate weapon against immoral character, and furthermore reveals the deficiency of social systems of morality inherent to organized religion, capitalism, and the State. These systems, in trying to enforce moral values rather than create an environment for self-flourishing, end up inhibiting the freedom of the individual, resulting in more reliance on external phenomena and subsequently worse moral character.

Emerson approaches a practically Marxist view in his essay *Politics*, remarking that “property demands a government framed on the ratio of owners and of owning.”¹² This hierarchy, Emerson further asserts, “must be executed by a practical lie, namely by force,” and that “this is the history of governments – one man does something which is to bind another.” This leads him to conclude that “any laws but those which men make for themselves are laughable,” which is perhaps the most concise anarchist framing of existentialism one could possibly provide.¹³ Whereas Nietzsche stops at just criticism of the State, Emerson goes on to fully envision a society without the State: “nor doubt that roads can be built, letters carried, and the fruit of labor secured, when the government of force is at an end.”¹⁴ Emerson’s ideas here have truly revolutionary potential, and more deeply they reveal what is so compelling about existentialism – the idea that we are fundamentally free, or that we *can* be. We’ve created nations and borders and governments because we didn’t have faith in the individual to be good – somehow our nature is corrupt, so we need governments to keep us in order. Anarchists flip this on its head. No, humanity is not corrupt – the systems we have created are. Man can be better;

¹¹ Emerson, “Politics,” 288.

¹² Emerson, “Politics,” 281.

¹³ Emerson, “Politics,” 287.

¹⁴ Emerson, “Politics,” 289.

there is a better world for man on the horizon, beyond our illusory systems, beyond hierarchy, beyond good and evil.

Nietzsche envisions the *Übermensch*, a new race of man. Likewise, Emerson imagines a society built upon character, upon individual self-reliance and inwardness. It is here where the revolutionary must learn never to overlook the individual, for it is ultimately with the betterment of the individual that the betterment of the community shall follow. Currently, however, “in our barbarous society the influence of character is in its infancy,” Emerson notes.¹⁵ A philosophical shift must take root throughout humanity in order for an anarchism to see itself through. There is no political change, no revolution, without a much deeper, more foundational, spiritual change. “A greater self-reliance,” Emerson asserts, “must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men.”¹⁶ This is the real work of revolutionary thought, and it is work that is seldom stressed by activists and thinkers. We cannot just tear down the old; we must build something new. This idea of a philosophical shift, a “greater self-reliance,” also illustrates how foolish it is to think that revolution can be forced. No. The revolution will come when people, as free individuals, *choose* revolution. We will know that the revolution has come when it is ideas that have triumphed over force.

The characterization of existentialist philosophy as too individualistic and ethically unhelpful is generally misleading; in further analysis, the philosophy has deeply relevant implications for the future of humanity and social life. In fact, existentialist critiques of hierarchy and the State are perhaps some of the most profound and powerful arguments in favor of anarchist revolutionary thought. Existentialism is the ultimate optimism in the greatness of man,

¹⁵ Emerson, “Politics,” 288.

¹⁶ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 166.

of any single man. If one can be great, then all can be great, if only we give each and every individual the chance to be. From this point, Existentialism can serve as the ultimate model of human flourishing and greatness, a pursuit, an idea, that is to be upheld by any serious revolutionary cause.

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