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An Essenceless Creation: An Investigation of Theistic Existentialism

The primary tenets of existentialism and Christianity, at first glance, seem insurmountably incompatible, especially given the dogmatic nature of most Christian doctrines; however, I find that the majority of criticism against the school of Christian existential thought is misguided. This paper aims to investigate two things: 1) the compatibility or incompatibility of two of the foundational tenets of existentialism—"existence versus essence" and the concept of angst-with Mainstream Christian¹ theology, and 2) the effects of these foundational existentialist tenets on Christian doctrine.

The first and most widely accepted tenet of existentialism is a statement of human nature, "Existence precedes essence."² According to this view of human nature, humans are not created with a fixed and given nature, or essence. In an effort to elucidate this view of human nature, Sartre contrasts it with the opposite view, essence precedes existence by way of an artisan making a pen knife. A pen knife is created the artisan with a concept of "pen knife" in mind- in other words, the essence precedes the existence, since the concept of "pen knife" arrived before the pen knife's creation. In this essentialist view, human beings are also created with a fixed concept in mind; according to essentialist theists, God had created a concept of man before man was actualized. However, existentialists would argue that there is no prior essence that determines our realized natures, hence man is radically free to determine his own nature; man is what he makes of himself. Humanity creates its own essence from a totality of actions³. Existentialism, while denying constraints on human nature, does not deny constraints on existence itself, i.e. mortality, space, time, etc. Nonetheless, these constraints on or conditions of existence do not constitute an essence or purpose and do not necessarily impose limitations on human freedom.

As stated above, the essentialist view of human nature is that humanity was created with an intended nature and concrete characteristics that form its essence. This view, at first glance, seems to be at the heart of many Mainstream Christian theologies. Within Calvinist and Post-Augustinian doctrines, man is perceived to have essentialist characteristics, such as "Original Sin" and "Total Depravity." The concept of "Original Sin" and its corollary, "Total Depravity" typically refer to a "sinful nature" of mankind that is both hereditary and incapable of being removed by human means. Since man has fallen from his intended purpose, sin has become part of his nature- leading to a state of "total depravity," in which humans are unalterably predisposed towards sin and are unable to avoid sinning, because it has become imbedded in human nature as an essentialist characteristic. Mainstream Christian dogma also asserts that man is created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*) and affirms, on the basis of this that humanity's essential nature is godlike and therefore has *innate* value. According to typical mainstream theists, these essentialist doctrines about man's nature serve as the mechanisms for mainstream theology. For example, according to typical mainstream theists, Christ's death (a crucial part of the Nicene Creed) was necessary for the atonement of man's sinful nature, therefore, an essentialist statement is necessary to explain the vital Nicene dogma. If it is the case that man has a nature-either sinful or godlike- then one

cannot really hold fast to a view of human nature according to which “existence before essence.” However, I do not find that the theistic doctrinal mechanisms require essentialist claims about human nature, nor are they necessarily incompatible with the fundamental tenets of existentialism.

To illuminate why theistic doctrinal mechanisms do not require essentialist claims nor are incompatible with existentialism, it would be helpful first to clarify another concept in existentialism- the existentialist conditions of existence. These conditions refer to conditions of being that are not part of an essential human nature. For instance, rationality, mortality, etc. are not essential characteristics of human nature, but are conditions of humanity’s being in relation to the world. These conditions do not affect the essence of mankind since they are accidental characteristics and do not constitute an absolute essence. Death and reason are included amongst accidental characteristics of human existence. It is conceivable that a man could chose not to be rational- for example Dostoyevsky’s *Underground Man*, yet, still be a man. Therefore, reason is not an essential characteristic of man’s nature. Death also is not a characteristic of man’s nature, since it is conceivable that a man could be in suspended animation forever and still be a man.

The theistic doctrines of sin and *Imago Dei* do not necessarily entail essentialism, because they too do not actually constitute a statement about human nature. The theistic doctrines of sin and *Imago Dei* are existential conditions of existence and are therefore not constitutive of an absolute essence and human nature. In theism, the concept of sin is tied directly to death; sin is an action for which the immediate consequence is death. St. Paul claims, “The wages of sin is death,” (Rom. 6:23)⁴. Death is a consequence of an action- a condition of existence that man has chosen- and not an aspect of man’s nature save how he chooses to interact with it. Man has chosen to live in and participate in sin, thus resulting in death. Furthermore, if man’s sinful nature is the cause of death, then it would’ve been impossible for Christ to die at all since a fundamental aspect of Christian doctrine was that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us,” (2 Cor. 5:21), and without a sinful nature, he should’ve been literally incapable of dying. Therefore, it must be the interaction with the world’s sinfulness that causes death, and sin is not something that is ingrained in man’s nature.

Similarly, *Imago Dei* does not constitute an essential human nature. As stated earlier, the standard interpretation of God in theology is that God maintains an essential nature, from which moral right and wrong are derived and from which humanity derives their essential nature. However, after consideration, one could argue that “in the image of God” does not entail essentialism. The statement “man is made in God’s image” is remarkably vague and does not imply essentialism, but a capacity. Famously in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare noted, “What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals. And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?”⁵ I would like to assert that the Bard was not too far off in his characterization of man as godlike; that man is godlike in his capacity to reason and understand. Reason, it seems, is firstly a condition of freedom and agency, without which existential freedom could not exist. Were it not for the existence of conscious

reason, man would have no choice but to blindly follow desire like an animal. Necessarily reason must be a capacity if true freedom is to exist, which is to say that reason can be or cannot be actualized depending on human action. Changing reason and desire from a characteristic of man's nature to a capacity of man's being preserves man's freedom by emphasizing that these attributes are reliant on choice without disconnecting the influence of these faculties on man's being. In other words, when Imago Dei references "godlike-ness," this is a capacity, not an essence. This capacity is expressed in man's godlike freedom, manifest by his reason or the fact that, like God creates existence *ex nihilo*, man creates his own essence, *ex nihilo*. Because man was born without an essence, man becomes responsible for forging his own essence from nothing, just like how God creates *ex nihilo*. This interpretation—that Imago Dei is God bestowing man with the capacity to create his own meaning from nothing—is another plausible understanding which does not contradict man's essenceless nature.

Run of the mill theists still find an essenceless man a difficult predicament for preserving God's omniscience.⁶ If God made a being whose existence was present before God had a conception of the being's essence, it would appear that God's omniscience would then be called into question. Omniscience and omnipotence are generally thought to be necessary characteristics of God, and positing that God created a being whose essence He did not himself know seems to be at odds with divine omniscience. To solve this quandary, in addition to the question of how God can be omnipotent/omniscient and man still remain free, I should like to posit the idea of selective omnipotence⁷. This allows us to account entirely for man's limitless freedom in a theistic worldview, by allowing for God to temporarily suspend omniscience/omnipotence in exchange for our freedom. To illustrate the notion of selective omnipotence, consider a Rorschach inkblot. One creates a Rorschach inkblot by dripping paint on half a sheet of paper, then folding it over to create a symmetrical design. It is only after the design is created that order and purpose is imposed in the form of us mentally shaping the inkblot to fit our own perception—two rats fighting over an apple, a space invader, a face, etc. Similarly, God creates the existential conditions of existence—time, space, rationality, etc.—represented by the paint, paper, dripping, etc. We do not know what essence will come from an inkblot until after it has already been created. This theory seems to have evidence in Genesis 3, where it appears that God is surprised at Adam and Eve's first transgression— as if He was unsure how man's essence was to evolve and develop.

If we can reasonably argue that man's essencelessness is preserved and his freedom is intact, we may now examine the effects of limitless freedom in a theistic world. Foremost, man's essencelessness creates limitless freedom, which in turn, leads to the existential concept of "angst." "Angst" is the idea that in the face of limitless freedom, mankind is solely responsible for its own existence since it is the originator of all its own choices. This limitless freedom and responsibility this gives us a sense of terror and awe, which existentialists refer to as "angst," "anxiety," or "dread."⁸ Angst is perhaps the most easily applicable existentialist concept to theism. Not only are we responsible by nature of our own existence, but we are also responsible for our actions before a holy God intent on the judgment of sin. It is a fairly common assertion in modern theism that "all sins are equal before God,"

typically as a indictment against weighing temporal judgment against others, but I feel that the consequences of this ideology, as laid out in James 2:10, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." is far more terrifying than that. The Bible, particularly the Old Testament describes God as judging and wrathful in the face of evil- that He must punish evil for the sake of its existence. Nahum 1:2 describes God as "...a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and vents his wrath against his enemies." If choosing to participate in sin on any level makes us responsible before an avenging, almighty deity, then the slightest sin is the cause of intense anguish. Furthermore, as illustrated by Dante in the *Inferno*, God also punishes *inaction*. In the *Inferno*, Dante describes the Gates of Hell surrounded by "the melancholy souls of those who lived without infamy or praise...who have not rebellious been, nor faithful were to God, but were for self."⁹ where those shamefully indifferent are chased incessantly by hornets and gadflies as poetic justice for their selfish inaction. Anselm of Canterbury described man as infinitely morally indebted to God, and that only man can recompense for human sin against God, but since all men participate in sin, this is impossible for man to do. Because of man's participation in sin, he is guilty before a God who is compelled to bring divine retribution upon evil. If man is fully responsible of all his actions and sins and *all* sins are equal before a judging God from lying to murder, then man is in a position of unprecedented angst. Every sin man choses makes him limitlessly guilty, before a limitlessly powerful and limitlessly holy and vengeful God, and man is totally unable to atone of himself from even the slightest sin.

The effects of complete existentialist freedom on Christian doctrine seems a bit drastic at first; on the surface, it seems that complete freedom diminishes the role of grace in theology. As stated earlier, in Mainstream Christianity, man is unable to save himself from his own sins. Thus, in order to bridge existentialist Christianity with Mainstream Christian theism, there needs to be some soteriological¹⁰ mechanism that emphasizes the divine nature of salvation without belittling human freedom, and vice versa. If the soteriological mechanisms downplay the role of man's freedom in salvation, then existential freedom becomes theistically meaningless; however, if the soteriological mechanisms totally undermine the divine nature of salvation, then existential Christianity becomes incompatible with Mainstream Christianity. Existential Christianity is quite apparently incompatible with certain mainstream theologies-particularly Calvinistic, which, without the essences, Calvinistic theologies are stripped of their soteriological mechanisms-namely, "Irresistible Grace" and its doctrines of election. It is stated fairly explicitly in Christian theism that grace is a crucial part of salvation, especially in St. Paul's writings. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast," (Eph. 2:8-9). Obviously, it would appear mandatory that grace should play the major role, instead of works and actions, and therefore human freedom. To reconcile the concept of divine grace and human actions, one must understand the relationship between faith and action, since divine grace is the result of faith. James 2:17-18 notes that, "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will

show you my faith by my deeds.” Clearly, faith and works are correlational. This is not to say that they are the same, but that faith is a belief-in-action. Firstly, this leaves faith as something paradoxically both subjective and objective. Because faith is rooted in belief, it must be personal and subjective since existentially there can be no true collective belief, but because it is expressed actively, faith is objectively expressed. One either acts or fails to act, there is no in-between; one either has faith or one doesn’t. In acting out faith, faith becomes us, existentially speaking, since a man’s essence is the sum of his actions. This is illustrated fairly well by Kierkegaard’s characterization of the “leap of faith” – that faith is necessarily characterized by action, and is not merely belief or trust. This characterization of faith as “belief-in-action” is distinct from merely “good works.” Good works exist for the sake of salvation (as a mechanism for salvation), while faith exists for the sake of itself, and grace is derived by it.

Thus, as Paul says, “It is by grace you have been saved through faith.” In reconciling Mainstream soteriology, and the need for grace, while still upholding the existential concerns of man’s freedom, divine grace still serves as the primary soteriological mechanism, yet is achieved through faith. Grace, bestowed by God divinely, requires faith for atonement. Faith is belief-in-action, and therefore it is up to man to chose to act in faith and receive grace or act in faithlessness and refuse God’s grace. Grace and faith exist independently; grace is “prevenient”¹¹ and exists outside human action. One choses to accept this divine grace, without which, salvation would be impossible “through faith”-through belief-in-action, thus empathizing human freedom.

The acceptance of existentialist themes in Christian doctrine- especially the lack of human nature-creates an overall stronger theology. Greater human freedom as a result of human essencelessness strengthens several other aspects of Christian doctrine, such as the free will theodicies, and the significance of faith. Sin, when depicted as a condition in which man choses to be a part of makes for a stronger theodicy because it allows theists to preserve God’s omnipotence without undermining God’s omnibenevolent aspects. In addition, existentialist’s concept of angst adds depth to the faith aspect of prevenient grace soteriology. For example, in the short story, “St. Emmanuel the Good, Martyr,” Unamuno emphasizes this Pascalian marriage of anguish and faith in a theistic world. The theistic doubt and the angst of choice harmonize to create a beautiful painting of faith in an absurd world. One could as easily call faith “belief-in-action” as one could call it action in spite of doubt and uncertainty. If Mainstream Christianity were to concede that man does not have an essence, theism would gain the existential emphasis on freedom and anguish, which would strongly embellish the concept of divine grace through faith and would provide renewed vitality to the free will theodicy without undermining Mainstream Christian dogma.

1. “Mainstream Christianity” is broadly defined as any branch of Christian thought which follows the Apostolic or Nicene Creed. (“I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and

- invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets. And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.”) Generally speaking, “Mainstream Christianity” includes Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox, and most forms of Protestantism, including Calvinism, Lutheranism, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, etc. It is important to note that in Mainstream Christianity, it is denomination-specific doctrine that promotes essentialism, and therefore, it will be necessary to examine each major doctrine individually.
2. “Existence precedes essence.” Originated in a short pamphlet by Jean-Paul Sartre entitled “Existentialism is a Humanism.”
 3. ‘In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait, and there is nothing but that portrait.’ –Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism”
 4. Rom 6:23 and all subsequent Biblical quotations are from the NIV Bible.
 5. *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene ii, L.12-17
 6. It is worth noting that many philosophers and theologians will find the quandary of whether or not God is an existentialist (does God’s existence precede His essence) a difficult one, since the qualities of omnipotence and omniscience, etc. imply an essence. There are several possible routes out of this complication: 1) Paul Tillich argues that God does not “exist” technically speaking, because “existence” necessitates being constrained by time and space. God is therefore entirely essence or doesn’t, technically speaking have an essence either. 2) God “exists” infinitely as a “self-caused cause” and therefore his essence, did not predate his existence and his essence is composed of actions. He is omnipotence, omniscient, omnibenevolent, etc. because He chooses to be; omnipotence, omniscience, etc. are the result of God’s actions. It is unclear exactly how to resolve this argument and unfortunately, the quandary remains outside the scope of this paper’s argument. It is however, worth noting.
 7. The argument for selective omniscience/omnipotence is similar to Thomas Paine’s political arguments during the American revolution- that lesser bodies and forces necessarily derive their powers from larger bodies and forces. In western political theory, the masses yield (note: the language, *yield*, not surrender) power to the government so that the government may receive its powers. In essence, the government derives or borrows its powers from

the people-the larger body. Similarly, man derives agency from God suspending His power (omnipotence); man's free will is an extension of God's omnipotence.

8. "Angst" is referenced in several prominent existentialist writings- Sartre describes it as "When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind – in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility... So every man ought to say, "Am I really a man who has the right to act in such a manner that humanity regulates itself by what I do." If a man does not say that, he is dissembling his anguish." (*Existentialism is a Humanism*). The theistic existentialist Kierkegaard references it in *The Concept of Dread* as "...the dizziness of freedom." and again in *Fear and Trembling* where he refers to the Abraham's anguish.
9. *The Inferno*, Cantos III, L 34-69
10. Soteriology refers to the study of salvation in theistic thought. In Mainstream Christianity, dogma states that the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Christ were necessary to atone for sin. The "soteriological mechanisms" in other words, are the mechanisms for salvation in theistic belief, or the processes by which man is saved.
11. "Prevenient Grace" is a concept in Arminian theology, which was adopted by John Wesley of Methodism, and states that grace exists outside human action and is depicted as a gift, "a gift that is always available, but that can be refused." ("Our Wesleyan Heritage"-United Methodist Church).