

Beyond Marxism and Existentialism: A Return to the Ancients for a Deeper Wisdom

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ABSTRACT

This article defines Existentialism and Marxism in rather broad terms. It argues that while there are certain redeeming qualities to these philosophies, they suffer from certain insurmountable shortcomings. The article then gives a rather brief account of the merits found among the ancients where an attunement to the idea of “wonder” and philosophical speculations of notions of love, may suggest a way to overcome the negative aspects of both Marxism and Existentialism. And while the latter two philosophies were an attempt to create a better world in many respects—albeit debatably unsuccessful in doing so – the ancients perhaps provide a more robust vision of humankind, a certain wisdom that even today may have significant ramifications.

Keywords: Ancient Greek Philosophy, Existentialism, Marxism, Wonder.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The essentially atheistic philosophies of Marxism and Existentialism offer insights into the human condition and mechanisms by which to attain freedom and overcome the painful gap between self and world, the impossibility of knowledge. However, these philosophies only go so far and a return to Ancient Greek belief in wonder may take such insights a step forward in greater fulfillment and understanding. In this article, I will begin by outlining Existentialism in general terms as well as Marxism in order to on the one hand reveal their redeeming qualities, while on the other, highlighting their shortcomings and thus as not offering a panacea for human ills. I then suggest that certain key ideas in Ancient Greek sources may offer a solution to being as such and even a more global vision of a better society. This is gleaned via the dialogue form of such philosophies, where love and wonder uphold the sacred triad, albeit one no longer venerated in many respects, namely that of truth, goodness, and beauty.

II. EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism can be defined as the notion that existence precedes essence. There is no prime Mover that gives existence meaning. Instead, one is caught in the facticity of being, of existence without a given established order. Instead, there is the nausea of being essentially free with no clear-cut way to decide and live, other than what we choose in this contingent state of affairs. As Sartre writes:

“The essential thing is contingency (...) To exist is simply to be there (...) no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not a delusion, a probability which can be dissipated; it is the absolute, consequently, the perfect free gift” (2007, p. 131).

Being somewhat thrown in the world as it were, one feels a certain angst, terror, fear, confusion and indeed, nausea. Such a philosophy stresses the inherent irrationality of existence. Freedom itself is dangerous. It prompts a choice that may be harmful. Yet it also is freedom from established tradition and convention. Yet not knowing how to choose, and how to act, one might feel uneasy, estranged from a world with no pre-existing order or divine mandate.

Born subsequent to World War II, Existentialism is the perfect foil to failed philosophies that promulgated a given “essence” and metaphysics in the name of a deity or nationalistic sentiment or by a certain program of knowledge and system of classification. For it is precisely such certainties and absolutes that have led to unspeakable crimes. Thus, although such freedom may be tenuously stable and lead to emotions such as anguish, anxiety, and confusion, it also means one can shape one’s own destiny, relying neither on faith nor belief.

However, since there are no principles on which to base one’s decision and mold oneself, as it were, such a philosophy falls short of a solution to the project of self-development and positive emotions within the

context in which one finds oneself. Such are the shortcomings, and I will address how a further step can be made, building on man's essential freedom that may have more productive outcomes—a compass provided by a discussion of wonder as found in Ancient Greek texts. Before that, let us briefly outline if Marxism fares any better.

III. MARXISM

As opposed to Existentialism, Marxism concludes that one does not have freedom, but rather alienation and estrangement as a result of disconnection to the products of one's labor; the stratification of social classes and being a mechanistic cog in a system that determines one's mode of existence and being. Such a state is so pernicious that it takes one away from one's very humanity and the ability to lead authentic lives. Marxists might blame belief in a supernatural god and the limitations of freedom that are determined by the ruling class, the bourgeoisie that so constrains healthy and productive living.

Unlike Existentialists, Marxists offer a solution to the problem proposed, namely the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and a different economic and social system, undoing philosophy from the outside in, changing the world rather than theorizing about it or simply interpreting it. Such theorizing and interpretation it might be argued is based on fantasy and pure reason divorced from dialectical materialism and the recognition that it is social norms that need to first change, not philosophy as such if man is to be free.

Its vision may have been somewhat Messianic in its belief that the ills of society are based on greed exemplified by private ownership and taking advantage of the wage earner through the few acquiring and extracting surplus profit. Nevertheless, as it manifested historically, it was a terrible failure and has led to even more inequalities and totalitarian states than it has resulted in the curtailing of individual liberty and human welfare.

Notwithstanding, Marxism does offer valuable insights into the enslavement of persons through the Capitalist system and that greed, power and personal accumulation of wealth and possessions is an anathema to humanist ideals such as love, charity, and authentic living. Moreover, it is precisely the recognition that philosophy is a result of cultural and social norms, rather than a transcendent enterprise that suggests that Marxists may have been right to propose a systems' change, rather than pure philosophy for philosophy's sake as the solution to the ills of existence.

IV. A RETURN TO THE ANCIENT GREEKS

Existentialism emphasizes the inherent freedom in man but qualifies such freedom as one where one is caught in the abyss of an indeterminate future, where no clear boundaries obtain, and this leads to emotional turmoil. While its initial insight is freeing one from the boundaries of a system, what do to with one's free will remains a thorn. Marxism, by contrast, begins with man's enslavement and offers an alternative social system to solve this dreary situation. Yet neither philosophy is ultimately optimistic: the former casts one into the abyss of indecision, while the latter prescribes upheaval and in practice does not work.

I would suggest an alternative, one that builds on individual freedom and social change. In Plato's *Theaetetus* (Allen, 1965, p. 105), Socrates presents the young Theaetetus with a number of difficult contradictions.

This is the exchange that ensues:

"S: I believe that you follow me, Theaetetus; for I suspect that you have thought of these questions before now.

T: Yes, Socrates, and I am amazed when I think of them; by the Gods I am! And I want to know what on earth they mean; and there are times when my head quite swims with the contemplation of them.

S: I see, my dear Theaetetus, that Theodoros had a true insight into your nature when he said that you were a philosopher, for wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder"

I would suggest that *wonder* is both the essence of philosophy and the prescription to a heightened state of being, a life marked by awe, connectedness, and mystery in the most positive sense. The philosopher then intrigued by the phenomena of the world and curious sets forth on a journey of discovery motivated and inspired by such wonder. It is this intuition that the philosopher and philosophy might inspire in others both in the exhilarating project of discovery in the sciences, arts, religion and so on and even in everyday life itself.

In this sense, nausea and even trepidation one may feel at the cold, indeterminate universe even in one's freedom as espoused by the Existentialists, is transformed into one of wonder, creativity, and awe. Such emotions, rather than cultivating an estrangement and alienation from the facticity of existence, in fact, binds one to the object in which case reality seethes with the energy of which one can so relate to and even

know. Yet while knowing is limited, the sense of wonder is not. Thus, wonderment allows for a sense of the infinite. This liberates one from dreary isolation in one's individuality to an ecstatic participation in the universe, a sense of vibrant aliveness, a mystery that does not produce terror, but rather exhilaration and empowerment. To be even more precise:

"Wonder is a complex emotion involving elements of surprise, curiosity, contemplation, and joy. It is perhaps best defined as a heightened state of consciousness and emotion brought about by something singularly beautiful, rare, or unexpected—that is, by a marvel" (Burton, 2014, p. 12).

Thus, it would appear that Existential torment in the face of an existence where no essence is perceived, where freedom is actually a burden of sorts, is alleviated by cultivating such a complex and liberating emotion. How can such an emotion refute the failings and warnings of Marxist thought?

To marvel at something is to transcend the mundane. Systems that stress the collective over the individual tend to forestall inner volition and eccentricities in favor of adherence to a set of norms. Yet the wonder is intensely personal. In the words of Marcus Aurelius:

"You have the power to strip away many superfluous troubles located wholly in your judgment and to possess a large room for yourself embracing in thought the whole cosmos, to consider everlasting time, to think of the rapid change in the parts of each thing, of how short it is from birth until dissolution, and how the void before birth and that after dissolution are equally infinite" (Aurelius, 2002, p. 85).

Freedom in thought and the ability to contain concepts such as infinity amidst the flux of the universe, begin and end in wonder. A philosophy that laments freedom as leading to the sterility of thought and conflicting emotions, does not consider the beauty of such liberty which thence lead to a containment of the cosmos as a whole, albeit falling short of complete knowledge, yet still harboring an ecstatic attunement to the magnificence of what is. Similarly, a philosophy that seeks to curtail freedom for the collective good eschews the fact that a good society is one where individual liberty is sacred, rather than a system that invariably leads to an oligarchy.

I would go further and claim such wonder or wonderment in the face of the universe entails the emotion of love. In Plato's words; "Love is desire for the perpetual possession of the good" (1951, p. 86). While the triad of Truth, Goodness and Beauty have come under severe attack and are no longer a sort-after goal of philosophy in many respects, I contend that a return to such notions is invaluable, though caution against systemizing such findings in the form of a political system or forceful prescription of tastes and behavior, at least to an extent. Certainly, there needs to be a just system and hence a definition of the good. There needs to be inquiry and proof and hence a delineation of what is true as opposed to that which is false. And there ought to be a value judgment, relative though it may be, concerning the beautiful as opposed to that which displeases and is horrific and thence potentially harmful.

Underlying such a triad is love, for is not the capacity to inquire and ask questions not motivated by love which is precisely the desire to unite with the "object" of contemplation and in its mature form, to form relationships with other beings or souls. This produces both self-knowledge and knowledge of the other and secures a life not marred by terror in the face of freedom nor terror in the face of a monolithic state.

V. CONCLUSION

The modern philosophies of Existentialism and Marxism sought to in the first instance to undo blind adherence to a set of norms, where one has to face one's own freedom in anguish, while the latter sought to undo alienation by making philosophy subordinate to a new economic and political system. Both failed to promote an enduring vision of either philosophical or emotional parity. An alternative was advanced in rejuvenating-albeit scantily in outline form-the philosophers of antiquity in their discussion of wonder and love. This inexorably led to the Truth-Goodness and Beauty triad which I maintain in a world which may be defined as post-modernist-a world of relative values and where philosophical speculation is waning in its materialistic leanings-is necessary. First, it may be a way to deal with individual angst and lack of purpose. Secondly, the utopian vision of Marxism may be found if a society is cultivated where questioning, and learning is not simply of practical value, but motivated by love, a love borne of a sense of the great mystery of the universe itself cultivated by wonderment. It is here then that the sciences and art are invigorated by a return to philosophical speculation as inaugurated in the West in antiquity.

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Daniel Shorkend was born in South Africa. He earned a doctorate in Art History at the University of South Africa. He moved to Israel in 2018. He has had various lecturing jobs at Universities and colleges and currently teaches at the Technion Institute of Technology in Haifa, Israel. His research output in aesthetics includes research into everyday aesthetics as well as the ambitious attempt at the interdisciplinary where he sees the convergence of the Humanities and the Sciences. He is also a practicing artist and has had a number of solo exhibitions as well as participating in group shows. He is the author of several books published by Lambert Academic and fictional publishers and has contributed academic articles to several journals.