Resisting Death [1]

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The Internet represents all of the interests of mankind. From the sweet to the unsavoury; from the intelligent to the unintelligible; from truth to vivid imagination; from humour to incredible tragedy. A blog on knitting is but a few clicks away from a video about skinning an animal, and a digitised cuneiform tablet from a live stream of a political debate. Every person's hobby and vocation is represented. So it should not be surprising that there are blogs, message boards, and "memes" about nihilism and existentialism.

Existentialism and nihilism are schools of philosophical thought. Blackburn defines[1] existentialism as

> A loose title for various philosophies that emphasize certain common themes: the individual, the experience of choice, and the absence of rational understanding of the universe with a consequent dread or sense of absurdity in human life.

Nihilism is described by Sire as "a lack of worldview"[2]. That is to say, nihilists believe in nothing: no purpose, no end goal, no reason for being.

Existentialism is considered to have been "founded" by Søren Kierkegaard. Friedrich Nietzsche was a famous, and caustic, nihilist. While these two were near contemporaries: Kierkegaard worked as a philosopher only a few years before Nietzsche. While Kierkegaard was a Christian, Nietzsche was an atheist. Many subsequent existentialists were also atheists (such as Jean-Paul Sarte and Albert Camus). Living in the "shadow"—so to speak—of Nietzsche, they wrestled with the question about finding meaning in an ultimately meaningless world, living ultimately meaningless lives.

In both nihilism and existentialism, there is a moment where one realises that life really is meaningless. What we, as individuals or groups (such as nations), achieve will pass away and be forgotten. Eventually, all traces of what we do, dream and aspire to will be washed away by the merciless and relentless march of time. As the Preacher[3] in the book of Ecclesiastes wrote:

> 'Meaningless! Meaningless!'
> says the Teacher.
> 'Utterly meaningless!
> Everything is meaningless.'
>
> Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NIV)

These philosophies are closely related to death and anxiety. As such, many people prefer simply to

avoid thinking about them. Others dwell on them; the profundity of this realisation being inescapable.

While these are heavy and serious topics, people will always find a way to make light of things. In the corners of the Internet that relish in these philosophies, one will find much dark humour. These glorify death. It sees death as a release from anxiety. Expecting to find nothing after death, the nothingness becomes preferable to the futility and incomprehensibility of life. Poems and aphorisms reflect wistfully on the sweet release of death. For some this could be the beginning of depression, or even thoughts of suicide. Some may not actively seek out death, but also would not mind if death were to unexpectedly happen.

A Christian cannot be a nihilist, because a Christian needs to believe in a certain set of things in order to be so. But there exists theistic and atheistic existentialism. The two have some things in common, but differ on others. As Blackburn said, what they have in common is "sense of absurdity in human life". Note that "absurdity" here does not necessarily mean "futility": a person can conclude that life is "absurd" (in a technical philosophical sense) while believing in God, the Bible, that Jesus died for one's sins, and having a future hope of resurrection, judgement and eternal paradise. A person can know these things and be excited about them, which is what *joy* is. However, *at the same time*, a person can lack *happiness* and *contentment* with life and their circumstances. Joy is not necessarily the same as happiness.

The only intended purpose of this article is to remind the Christian reader to not give in to the dark humour and eager anticipation of death (with which they can be bombarded, depending on the company which they keep). The Christian must *resist* death. There are several reasons for this. Death is not natural:

- God made humanity to *live*. Death is a consequence of sin, which did not originally exist in mankind. Through Adam and Eve, death came as a penalty for sin. Through Jesus, eternal life is promised in the future, sinless world.
- Death is the undoing of creation. God declared that His creation was "good". Death undoes what He created by causing a state of "unbeing".
- Death is punishment. But as Christians, we no longer stand condemned through the atonement of Jesus's death. Wishing for death is to spurn this atonement, and the subsequent release of the choke hold which death has.

This is an incredibly difficult and complex topic, especially when dealing with someone who has depression. It is only meant as a reminder. Of course, after having lived a full life, one may be ready to depart, but this should not be at the cost of suicide. One needs to run the race until the end.

Death may be doubly tempting for the Christian, because unlike nihilists, Christians look forward to an eternity with Christ. Even Paul wrote to the Philippians:

> For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will bring fruit from my work; yet I don't know what I will choose. But I am in a dilemma between the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Yet, to remain in the flesh is more needful for your sake. Having this confidence, I know that I will remain, yes, and remain with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, that your rejoicing may abound in Christ Jesus in me through my presence with you again.
>
> Philippians 1:21–26

God will call you home in due time. Even if we feel aimless, purposeless and alone, we must continue finding and living out a purpose [2]. We are not defined by what the world looks at, only our relationship with Jesus. And He requires His followers to be people working and striving towards the advancement of the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Happiness is not the same as joy. But in joy is found hope: a hope for a glorious future brought about *by what we do here on earth*. For the sake of the Kingdom of God, do not give up on hope.

- 1. Blackburn, Simon. Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy *[3]*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- 2. Sire, James W. The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue *[4]*. 5th ed. Downers Grove, IL, USA: InterVarsity Press, 2009.
- 3. The book of Ecclesiastes can, in retrospect, be seen as a work which is existentialist in nature.

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