



Atheism in contemporary society, what does that
mean?

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Remarking on the apparent decline in religious belief and the rapid evolution of a more secular society in Europe, this paper will investigate the changing values people have adopted during this transition in history. To make this exploration possible, video interviews of a sample of individuals were conducted in different countries throughout Europe to obtain a more reliable outlook of how people make sense of their lives and express their universal concerns today. This research amounts to the investigation of how people view the roles of religion and atheism in their lives in contemporary society. Much of this study will rely on an examination of the work of two prominent modernist atheist

philosophers, specifically Nietzsche and Sartre, and the manner in which they assess the credibility in having no religious beliefs. This research will first look at Nietzsche's concept of the Death of God, a powerful atheistic engagement in a philosophy that is coherent and inspiring. Second, this paper will explore Nietzsche's ideas about the beliefs that have taken hold in contemporary society and are generally expressed in the interviews. Finally, we will shed light on contemporary beliefs through an assessment of the work of Sartre, the pioneer of atheist existentialism, through what he values most: a clear engagement in the world we inhabit.

One can argue that religion and philosophy have very similar goals, each giving sense to one's life. We often talk about philosophy of life, specifically ways of living that "make sense" to the one experiencing it. According to the British Humanist Association, while it is difficult to arrive at a measure of people's faith, a decrease in religious beliefs is observable in England and Wales. Since the nineteenth century, religion and more specifically Christianity in Europe began to have less influence over the population due to ideas spread during the Enlightenment in the previous century, an episode that brought an important rationalisation to what we perceive as true. Indeed, philosophers of the time started to challenge these religious beliefs and the Church itself.

According to a poll conducted by YouGov asking people "Are you religious?" 65% of the people interviewed answered negatively. "2011 Census: Asked when they had last attended a place of worship for religious reasons, most people in England and Wales (63%) had not attended in the past year". (British Humanist Association, no date)

How did philosophers of the nineteenth century challenge traditional ways of thinking to the point of deeply influencing their era and the world that we know today? The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was a particularly important participant in this transition. He believed in the power of secular life and that Christianity could no longer dictate people's lives, famously declaring the *Death of God*.

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?
— Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 125, tr. Walter Kaufmann (Hollingdale, 1999, pp. 139)

A vocal atheist, Nietzsche does not intend to suggest that God did exist and has died. His intention is to express that God can no longer be a credible source of absolute moral principles. This means that moral values can't be definite and applicable for absolutely all aspects of life. Human beings can no longer count on the absolute value systems that religions put in place because men should be free. This freedom requires a lot of responsibility such as becoming an adult. Humans cannot expect to be taught what is right or wrong, and need to discover their own moral values, their own philosophy of life in order to reach their full potential, ideally as an *Übermensch* (overman) according to Nietzsche. For him, Christianity renders people unable to reach this potential because it steals people's freedom to choose and act upon their lives in the best way possible for their fulfilment. Nietzsche explains the concept of the *Übermensch* in his novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where he says that man is in-between the animal and the overman, a liminal status that constitutes the human condition. "Man is something that shall be overcome... Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman – a rope over an abyss... What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end." (Nietzsche, 2005, pp.118). People are constantly reaching beyond themselves to push their limitations and becoming who they really want to be. It is Nietzsche's desire to give back to humanity the human feature of power that Christianity, and certainly other religions, took away and displaced into a transcendent paternal model, God.

The Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky always posed the question of God in his struggle. The choice is hard to make. On one side there is a moral system universalised by religious beliefs that secure a respect of basic moral principles. On the other, we observe an atheism that gives back to human beings the responsibility and freedom to choose for themselves. However, this is taking the risk of an untouchable amorality that can lead to various crimes. In *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky chooses a specific spirituality for each of his characters that marks this dilemma. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the reader follows the stories of three brothers that have very different beliefs: one a hedonist, another a rationalist and the last, devout. Through his characters, Dostoyevsky creates a dialogue between the different spiritualities and wonders that surely he and people of the time were struggling with. One of them is a dialogue about religion and morality: “If God doesn’t exist everything is permitted”, stating that if religious institutions were to disappear, and society would have no objective moral model to follow. The question that arises from this statement is that if people have the freedom to decide for themselves, what kind of society will then develop? Are people actually capable of setting their own moral system?

In order to answer this question about the capability of humankind to sustain a durable moral system without religion, I went to ask people in person. In order to do so, I interviewed people in different parts of Europe randomly chosen in the street, to ask them how they live. Three essential questions were asked: “What do you hope for? What do you worry about? What makes you happy?”

These questions are made to point out the features of life that reveal the ways these people are engaged in the world, their struggles and how they find they place into themselves and society. The three fundamental questions that I ask in my interviews reveal people’s values. Hope is the aspiration of what we, as humans want to search for, what we want to achieve. It is also the expectation of something good coming in the

future. Hope is the ideal of what we want to become, throwing ourselves in the future that would become the ideal reality of tomorrow. Worry is also a feeling of expectation for something to happen but in the fear and stress of pain, loss and potential problems. Sartre calls it *Angoisse* (anguish), for him it is the normal fear that each individual has in front of his/her freedom and responsibility. “With this in mind, Sartre insists that anguish is that consciousness of freedom in which freedom itself is in question.” (Catalano, 1980, pp. 70).

Happiness is what hope tries to reach by being accomplished and what we fear losing from worrying. It is a state of contentment or fulfilment, very close to the hedonist philosophy that prioritise pleasure and the absence of pain: the best that can possibly be achieved.

It can be argued that by asking these questions I influence the interviewees towards a certain category of answers related to happiness and contentment. This would mean that the interviews are not representative of people’s philosophies. It is important to acknowledge the fact that according to the context of how the information is being captured, there is the potential of a gap between what are people’s answers and their authenticity. As Nietzsche says: “There are no facts, only interpretations” (Babich, 1994, pp. 37). Information needs to be interpreted even in science or researches that are looking for objective results because we can’t assume that things are how they are. The interpretation is an important part of what the interviews can bring to this project. These questions require interviewees to ask themselves what fulfil their lives and when we talk about fulfilling we talk about needs, physical or metaphysical ones. These questions reveal what value system people are adopting or creating because the feeling of fulfilment is about what feels good and right, so it is about philosophy of life. In that sense, the interviews are relevant. Most people interviewed are concerned about the human condition and the physical needs they have to deal with and fulfil. Health and family are the most common answers (Pendle, 2015) revealing the reality of a life that needs to be cultivated and taken care of.

Hedonism is the philosophy that puts pleasure and pain at the centre of its concern.

Pleasure is all the positive sensation and experiences that humans can come across, these are considered as what is ethically right. What is ethically wrong is what brings pain, meaning all the negative experiences and sensations that humans can come across.

“Jeremy Bentham asserted both psychological and ethical hedonism with the first two sentences of his book *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*: “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain*, and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do”.” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, no date)

If peace is tranquillity and the absence of war then it can be said that it is also the absence of events, it is a moment or a state when and where nothing happens revealing that the world is already hard and dangerous enough, and that humans need to counterbalance this by hoping for negation or peace. It is a world view that is related to Schopenhauer’s philosophy, a pessimistic perception of the world. According to Nietzsche: Christians, Buddhists, Schopenhauer and surely people interviewed that represent our western society in the 21st century have similar hedonistic values.

“The pessimism of Schopenhauer, the Buddha, and Christianity, the pessimism of the weak in general, consists of a hedonistically negative description of life.” (Nietzsche, 2005)

My interviews are far from being part of Nietzsche’s philosophy. The interviews show a strong hedonism that is focused on pleasure and happiness. Nietzsche criticises the people of his time in one of his novel. He calls the phenomena of taking no risk, staying in comfort and security: “the last Man”, the one who discovered happiness.

Lo! I show you THE LAST MAN.
“What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?
—so asketh the last man and blinketh.
The earth hath then become small, and on it there hoppeth the
last man who maketh everything small. His species is
ineradicable like that of the ground-flea; the last man liveth
longest.
“We have discovered happiness” — say the last men, and blink
thereby.
They have left the regions where it is hard to live; for they
need warmth.
One still loveth one’s neighbour and rubbeth against him; for
one needeth warmth.
— Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Prologue section 5, p.12

This is an important point because if we can observe a strong similarity between the people interviewed and what describe Nietzsche as “the last Man” then we could argue that Europeans have not developed a coherence between atheism and atheistic philosophy. They certainly cancelled the idea of God but surely not the transcendent religious beliefs that restrict people from being free and fully achieved.

Jean-Paul Sartre talks about philosophers of the 18th century such as Diderot, Voltaire and Kant that became atheist because they cancelled the notion of God. However, they still kept the concept that was behind it: humans have a predestined or pre-birth purpose, it could be called a religious conception of atheism. (Existentialism is a Humanism, Sartre, 1946)

The existentialist is strongly against that sloppy morality which tries to remove God without ethical expense, like the French professors of the 1880's who saw God as a useless and expensive assumption but still wanted definitive rules like 'do not lie' to exist a priori. The existentialist, on the contrary, finds it rather embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with him any possibility of finding values in a heaven. Dostoevsky wrote "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted"; that is the starting point of existentialism.

That is what can be observed in the interviews: a sort of residue of religion that results of a hedonistic philosophy not clearly established. That is what Sartre is trying to show and acknowledge in order to change it. Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy is actually almost the opposite of what interviewees believe in. Indeed according to Sartre you are thrown into the world without any purpose, this links to Nietzsche's nihilism. Human beings need to find their own purpose themselves. It is a philosophy of action and engagement into the world. For Sartre, it is not about being a biological entity but existing as the definition of the world: being aware outside of your own self (EX meaning outside). For Sartre, existing is being conscious or aware outside of yourself, in the world. Most of people in the interviews talk about consciousness in a very meditative and internal sense of the word. Sartre is against that. For him, people should have a precise engagement in the world by building their own essence, the sense of their lives. Some of the interviewees propose a clear engagement: "I am happy if I am able to participate in other people's well-being." (Pendle T, 2015)

"Making things and doing things, meeting new people. I'd like to meet other artists and work with other artists" (Pendle, 2015)

Sartre talks about responsibility and anguish that people have in their actions, an important part of the human condition. For him when you make a decision, you decide for the whole of humanity because by choosing you encourage everyone on a certain direction for humanity. Sartre gives the example of marriage. If you decide to get married, you also decide to promote humanity on the path of monogamy. So his philosophy is very individualist in order to contribute to humanity in the way people decide to do so. This is also connected to Nietzsche's concept of superman, putting human beings on a position of power to move forward. Interviewees don't seem to believe in such power:

"-What do you hope for?"

-Inner peace.

[...]

-What do you worry about?

-That I am not able to let go of all those fears for the future and fears from the back and just be here!” (Pendle, 2015)

In order to explain more clearly the concept of non-predestined existence, Sartre in his work *Existentialism is a Humanism* take the example of the paper cutter or paper knife. The concept of the paper cutter is showing that the role of “things” (matter) is essentially the opposite of the role of humans. For Sartre, “existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 1946). People are thrown into the world (existence) and find their purpose afterwards (essence). On the other hand, the paper cutter already has been conceived to cut paper, its name already gives its purpose. Like a table, a computer or a bed, the paper cutter’s essence was defined before its existence. It is been created because it was needed. “Existence precedes essence” also means that humans are subjectivity. There are not objects like the paper cutter but subject. Humans being individuals with uniqueness, their purpose is discovered or created by themselves. “Man is action” according to Sartre. In that sense, this perception of man is very similar to Nietzsche’s and his “will to power” because it put “faith” in a nonreligious way in what the human potential. There is a sort of dignity for humanity that can be felt in the ideas of these two philosophers. What I find so fascinating about them is that they really believe and value humanity in what it can achieve or change. “Man is a project” says Sartre. “I just want everything to be calm and quiet.” (Pendle, 2015) says one interviewee.

I can feel a sense of dignity regarding my condition of human being when I read Sartre and Nietzsche. It is a sense of pride to be human like you would value and be proud of being part of a specific culture or team. We all relate because we all share the same condition in regards of morality, needs etc... But what is so great about being human is our ability to create our own paths in life and what we thrill for in our uniqueness. We are unique

because we are subjects that experience life in a very personal and subjective way. That is the beauty of it.

The Sartrean idea of morality is about subjectivity.

Let us say that moral choice is comparable to a work of art. Do we reproach the artist who makes a painting without starting from laid-down rules? Did we tell him what he must paint? There is no pre-defined picture, and no-one can say what the painting of tomorrow should be; one can judge only one at a time. Amongst morals, the creative situation is the same, and just as the works of, say, Picasso, have consequences, so do our moral judgements.

Art and morality are similar in the sense that in both cases there is creation and invention.

Sartre, calling himself an atheist existentialist, he believes that there is no religion that should dictate an absolute morality that everybody should follow. It is first dangerous like all other dictats and then it cuts down people's capacity and creativity to assume the purpose of their life and set it for themselves for a better diversity and health. According to Sartre "the impossibility to go beyond human subjectivity" (Existentialism is a Humanism, 1946). Coming back to the paper cutter, he actually says that religion, Christianity in that case, puts human beings on the same level as the paper cutter. God gives to people a predestined purpose and unable people to find their real path. "God produces man, just as the artisan, following a definition and a technique, makes a paper. Thus, the individual man is the realization of a certain concept in the divine intelligence" (EH 18) (Skocz, 2008, pp.76)

So again Sartre does not believe in determinism, where human actions are determined by external causes to the will. In that sense, man does have freedom. "Man is condemned to be free" (Exist. is a hum.). The oxymoron that contains that phrase is very representative

to Sartre's philosophy. We are free because existence precedes essence so being human is about having choices to become who we choose to become and nothing can be the pretext of an obligation coming from external factors. On the other hand, "condemned" can implicitly represent his idea of what this freedom implicates: a huge amount of responsibility and the *angoisse* (anguish) of staying true to what we believe in without falling into bad faith; that is what freedom takes. We are condemned because we didn't create ourselves. "Given that the human being is fundamentally anguished, and that anguish is a state that any individuals would rather escape, it is natural that any individual will attempt to flee anguish. This is what bad faith is, to Sartre: the attempt by consciousness to lie to itself," (Daigle, 2010, pp. 61). He wants to present a coherence between atheists and atheist philosophy.

So from analysing what atheist philosophers believe about what it "takes" to be an atheist, my observations have found that society has not changed a great deal since Nietzsche's criticism on hedonism. The interviewee's to some extent have a rather hedonistic approach towards life, this means that they base their moral system on pleasure and pain; this is something that can be constructed as a pessimistic approach to life. It is rarely seen that people put their hopes outside of themselves or beyond comfort, to be able to reach their full potential or to have engagement within the world.

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