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Sarte's Lawless Chaos

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THE WORLD TODAY is intensely hostile to the message of the Bible. There are many forms of this hostility. Existentialism, whether secular or religious, hold that there is no rational explanation of anything, and that the values of life are whatever each individual chooses them to be. God has imposed no moral law on humanity, and each individual is utterly free.

#### THE SECULAR SIDE OF IT

Although Jean Paul Sartre is a secular, rather than a religious existentialist, some attention must be paid to him both because of his preeminent position in the movement and because he has important things to say about theology.

The basic principle of existentialism, says Sartre, is that "existence precedes essence." This anti-intellectualistic phrase means that the Aristotelian *That* precedes the Aristotelian *What*. For example, if a carpenter wishes to make a cabinet, he must first know what a cabinet is and what particular size and shape of cabinet he intends to make. There the *What* precedes the *That*; essence precedes existence. So, too, the Christian idea of God includes the notion that God knew what he was going to create before he created it. The doctrine of Providence ascribes to God a knowledge or plan of history that antedates the events. This is what Sartre denies. With him there is no pre-existent plan of history, nor even a determinate human nature, made in the image of God, that all men must have; and of course, there is no original sin that makes us sinners before we are born. On the contrary, each man makes himself what he becomes. The *What* follows the *That*.

With Sartre the world is a lawless chaos into which man is thrown. When first thrown into the world, man too is a chaos, a *That* without a *What*. Thus human existence originates in a nothingness and culminates in another nothingness – death. Man's being therefore is an anticipation of death or nothingness. For this reason the basic category of being is anxiety or dread. This dread of death may lead a man to seek refuge in unauthentic being. That is to say, a person tries to forget death by sinking himself in the customs and hypocrisies of society. He becomes a mass-man instead of becoming an existing individual. He satisfies himself in slavery, in mediocrity; he accept the level of everybody else and thus escapes the need of making decisions and being responsible for them.

Against this mediocrity, the existentialist calls on us to decide, to make a choice to live authentically, to become an individual, to commit ourselves to being.

In this choice man, they say, is completely free. Without a human nature and without God, there is nothing to bind man. There is no moral law; everything is permitted. Man is the sole source of his own values. He chooses his own motives. Even after a man has created his own essence by choosing values, he is still completely free and can choose again and alter his general sim. He can always become another man by a total conversion. Man therefore is always free and never determined.

Let us now for a moment stop and think. If I create values by my free choice, the does not even mediocrity or hypocrisy become a value if I choose it? How can there ever be bad faith, if I deliberately choose and how can there be self-deception if my choice creates the values?

#### VICIOUS RELATIVISM

The matter of logic is crucial. The power of the Gospel message depends on it. If faith can curb logic, then Brunner can believe one pair of contradictories, I can accept another pair, and you can curb logic in a third place. You cannot say that I am absurd, not can I say that you are absurd, since we both retain the right to contradict ourselves at any point we wish.

Here is relativism in all its viciousness. Nothing is absolutely true. Nothing is true for all people. Everybody is free to create his own truth and value. Even orthodox Christianity can be true for a few medieval minds! But if each individual makes his own "truth" by passion and emotion, free decision and personal encounter, all becomes chaos and anarchy. Christ died and he did not die; he rose and he did not rise; there is a life beyond the grave, and the grave is our final doom. This, my Christian friends, is insanity.

We may not read Bultmann or Heidegger, but the ideas of these men permeate popular publications. Few congregations escape their influence. Similarly few congregations escape the influence of communism, the new morality, scientism, and Romanism. We are therefore in a hostile world. We are in the midst of wolves. There is no possibility of our being carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease. We must fight to win the prize and sail through bloody seas.

The difficulty, the hardship, the danger would not be worth it, if we were to preach our own existential experience, but this we do not do; on the contrary, we proclaim the message God has revealed to use in His infallible word.