Thinking About Being Human in a Post-Humanist World

One of the most fundamental and important developments in Western culture over the past few centuries has been the move away from thinking about humans as sharing some purpose or meaning that is essential to being human. Though people may have argued as to just what the essential meaning or purpose of being human is, throughout most of the modern era they would have at least shared the assumption that there is such a purpose or meaning and that it is important to know what it is. In fact, it is essential. Only by knowing such truth and by living according to it could one succeed at life. More recently, however, the idea that there is some purpose that has been given to human existence or a meaning that is essential to being human has been left behind. At this point in our cultural story, the important truths are no longer ones that we need to discover about humans as human; instead, the important truths are the ones that we create for ourselves as individuals and as communities. It is now difficult to make anything of the idea that human beings might be united by some shared purpose or meaning that is essential to being human. In other words, one might say that we live in a post-Humanist world.

To get just the slightest glimpse of how this important story line has played out, let me take us back to the seventeenth century and to René Descartes. Living in a time of tremendous intellectual change and uncertainty Descartes looked to reason alone to find answers to his most basic questions. In doing so he not only viewed reason as the central method for discovering truth, he also established reason as being the very essence of what it means to be human. Building on his famous first principle, "I think, therefore I am," Descartes concluded that the thinking self is a substance, "the whole essence or nature of which was to think."[1] In Descartes' view, thinking is what makes life worth living, and to succeed at thinking is to succeed at life. Once Locke and Newton had demonstrated such success and had also shown just how productive reason could be, many Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century came to share Descartes' convictions, first, that reason is the fundamental and essential characteristic that defines our humanness and, second, that to think well is to live well.

Well before the end of the 18th century, however, critics began rebelling against the idea that reason constitutes the essence of being human. Romantic writers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and William Blake could not imagine granting first place to something so bland and passive as reason. "Oh you rationalists!" laments Goethe. "Passion! Drunkenness! Madness! ... He prizes my intelligence and my talents more than he does this heart, which is after all my sole pride, which is the only source of everything I have, of all my force, all my bliss, and all my

misery. Oh, anyone can know what I know–only I possess my heart.”[2] Other romantics echo these sentiments. Whereas Descartes had declared that “all excess tends to be bad,”[3] William Blake lauds the path of excess and cites energy, not reason, as the source of action. “Energy is eternal delight”[4] he writes, and “exuberance is beauty.”[5] Blake portrays reason as the breeding ground of passivity, gives primacy to desire, and warns against allowing reason to restrain or usurp desire’s place. In reaction against harsh reason, then, the Romantics urge us to see our emotional or passional nature as essential, and they urge us to give primacy to feeling and desire rather than to our mere ability to think.

Other philosophers went in still other directions to find what is most essential to human existence. Early in the 19th century, Arthur Schopenhauer, asserted the primacy of the will over both intellect and passion. While largely accepting Kant’s eighteenth-century rationalist epistemology, Schopenhauer proposed that Kant’s inaccessible “thing-in-itself” should be understood as the human will. Schopenhauer accepted the Platonic or Kantian dualism between intellect and will, but he privileged will over intellect rather than intellect over will. “For Schopenhauer, it is the will which orientates all other action and, as such, represents the core essence of the self.”[6] As cognitive functions are manifestations of the will, so the will has primacy over our cognitive functions. It was Schopenhauer, not Nietzsche, who gave us the conception of the “will to life,” and when he did so he proposed it as a candidate for what constitutes the very essence of being human.

Shortly after Schopenhauer wrote *The World as Will and Representation*, Ludwig Feuerbach tried to move the discussion forward by arguing that the human essence lies in neither reason, nor feeling, nor will alone but rather in the combination of the three. “What then, *is* the nature of man?” Feuerbach asks. “What constitutes the specific distinction, the proper humanity of man?” He answers, “Reason, Will, Affection.” Repeatedly, Feuerbach argues that the trinity of “reason, love, force of will ... are absolute perfections of being. To will, to love, to think, are the highest powers, [they] are the absolute nature of man as man, and the basis of his existence. Man exists to think, to love, to will. Now that which is the end, the ultimate aim, is also the true basis and principle of a being.”[7] Like his predecessors Feuerbach assumed that there is an essence to being human and that it is also essential for us to know what it is.

Gradually, however, as people struggled to identify the essence of being human, the various contending views began to cancel each other out, and the very notion of a meaning-giving, human essence began to erode. Alasdair MacIntyre, a leading intellectual historian of our own day, argues that by sometime in the first half of the 19th century the handwriting was already on

the wall. “The sum total of the effective criticism of each position by the others” he writes, “turned out to be the failure of all,”[8] and with the failure of all, the very notion of a shared purpose or essential meaning for humans as human slipped away. Rather than come up with new and improved answers to questions such as What constitutes the human essence? or What is the purpose of human existence? important thinkers simply gave up the questions. Though it took a long time for this all to settle in, the very idea of an essence or meaning that is inherent to human existence gradually slipped away.

One of the first to unpack the anti-essentialist outcome of modern thought, and who did so as powerfully as anyone ever has, was Friedrich Nietzsche, in whom “the argument shifts from the ground up.”[9] Nietzsche put the kibosh on the very idea of a purpose that has been given to human existence or a meaning that is inherent to being human. Although he gave primacy to the will over the intellect or the heart, Nietzsche did not propose that the will gives meaning or purpose to life. To the contrary, the will is simply what emerges as most fascinating and central once the old questions about meaning and purpose have been set aside. Nietzsche dropped such questions and encouraged others to do the same. He recognized that at the end of modernity, there are no meaning-giving essences and we would do well to drop the quest to find them.

Nietzsche made this point in more than one way but did so most famously by talking about the death of God and the twilight of the idols. Rejecting theism of every sort, and recognizing that modern attempts to identify a human essence or purpose without God had only been self-deceptive ways of trying to get from other sources what only religion can give, Nietzsche urged his contemporaries to face up to the idea that there is no source that is capable of giving humans purpose or inherent meaning. In *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche asks, “What alone can *our* teaching be?” He answers:

> “That no one *gives* a human being his qualities: not God, not society, not his parents or ancestors, not *he himself*.... *No one* is accountable for existing at all... He is *not* the result of a special design, a will, a purpose; he is *not* the subject of an attempt to attain to an ‘ideal of man’ or an ‘ideal of happiness’ or an ‘ideal of morality’ – it is absurd to want to *hand over* his nature to some purpose or other. *We* invented the concept ‘purpose’: in reality purpose is *lacking*.”[10]

Purpose, as Nietzsche understands it, is a human invention, not something that is rooted in some meaning-giving reality–not God or society, not humanity or man, not happiness or morality.

Note especially that while Nietzsche was certainly eager to free us from God, he was also intent on freeing us from all the substitutes and idols that people have always wanted to put in God's place. Nietzsche understood that such idols are no more capable of infusing life with meaning than the dead God whose place they take. That is why Nietzsche and his heirs have always worked hard to "prevent us from inventing God-surrogates"[11] such as reason, nature, humanity, the thing-in-itself, scientific method, society, natural selection, the author, the text, the subject, and so on in order to try to get from them what a dead God can no longer give.

As Nietzsche recognized, he came before his time, but his time did come a century later, and no one demonstrates this fact more powerfully than the French thinker Michel Foucault. Like Nietzsche, Foucault understood that the "death of God" means not only that God is gone but also that everything that the modern world had wanted to put in God's place had disappeared as well. This includes not only the notion of purpose, as Nietzsche had argued, but also the notion of Humanity or, to use Foucault's term: "Man." Listen to how Foucault builds on Nietzsche and expresses our time in thought. "In our day," Foucault writes, "and once again Nietzsche indicated the turning-point from a long way off, it is not so much the absence or the death of God that is affirmed as the end of man.... Is it not the last man who announces that he has killed God, thus situating his language, his thought, his laughter in the space of that already dead God?" Foucault recognizes that the only way to make something of the very notion of "Man" is for there to be a God who infuses Man's existence with meaning. Ironically, then, in disposing of God, Man removes the source of his own meaning and robs himself of the significance of his own act. "Rather than the death of God–or, rather, in the wake of that death and in a profound correlation with it–what Nietzsche's thought heralds is the end of his murderer."[12] Again, Foucault notes, "Nietzsche discovered the point at which man and God belong to one another, at which the death of the second [God] is synonymous with the disappearance of the first [man]." Foucault then concludes, " It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man's disappearance."

Foucault celebrated this void and found in it a freedom and a space "in which it is once again possible to think,"[13] but make no mistake about it, Foucault's place of freedom is still a void. Granted, it is a void in which possibilities abound and in which the exploration of these possibilities is affirmed and celebrated, but while everything is possible, nothing is necessary. In other words, nothing is essential. There is no truth that we need to know about ourselves as human, no purpose given, no meaning inherent in our being. Everything is possible because meanings and purposes are ours to invent without limit. There is no meaning-giving essence, no

truths that are essential for us to know. There are only the meanings and purposes we give ourselves and the truths that we create for ourselves both as individuals and as communities.

The void that Foucault celebrated thirty years ago, marks out the space in which higher education has had to function in recent decades and in which our culture broadly has found itself for the past twenty-five years. This is not an easy place in which to live, and it is certainly not an easy place in which to think about what it means to be human. Because God-surrogates such as Man, Humanity, and human nature have been sounded out, and essential meanings have been ruled out, scholars have had to imagine other ways of theorizing the human. Some have reasserted a humanism based in natural science. Many have explored crucial aspects of human experience by rooting their thought in the body along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability. Others have appropriated and modified key thinkers such as Marx or Freud, and still others have looked to the experiences of human interaction: to the experience of "the other," to the social construction of human reality, or to communicative and communitarian theories. Many other scholars have simply ignored their cultural context and gotten on with their work, not realizing the extent to which Nietzsche and his heirs frame the work that these scholars do and the lives they lead. As we think about the eclipse and reappearance of the human in higher education, therefore, we must not kid ourselves. We face a formidable challenge.

You may be tempted to respond to what I have just said about the Nietzschean character of contemporary culture with a look of disdain and a sarcastic word of dismissal. "After all," you might assert, "there are no real Nietzcheans around, and Foucault was simply over the top. Why can't we just set them both aside and get on with our lives?" The reason we cannot simply set them aside, however, is that unless we consciously re-frame them, they are very likely already framing us. I would argue that they articulate the fundamental intellectual framework that continues to underly our culture. Often, our ways of thinking about many things, including what it means to be human, are framed by Nietzsche, but we do not realize the extent to which this is true. For instance, current versions of naturalistic humanism that are flowing out of the various atheist manifestos of recent years (Dennet, Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris, et al) are best understood in Nietzschean terms. There is no compelling necessity in nature in which to root the humanism that these thinkers assert. Their humanism is a choice that they make based in their own will, not in some fundamental truth or reality that demands such a choice of them or of the rest of us. In other words, they are putting their will into life just as Nietzsche says they are. They are free to put their will into life as they desire, but they should not kid themselves as to the extent that Nietzsche frames their choices, nor should they think that by making a dismissive comment or

two about Nietzsche or postmodernism that they have somehow broken out of the framework that Nietzsche articulated or that they have thrown its burden of lightness off their backs.

In a similar manner, theoreticians of the human who base their thought in the body (gender, race, etc.) or in Marx or Freud, or in community or religion may be more completely framed by Nietzsche than is obvious to us. Some of these theoreticians are quite content with such a framework, others are not so content, and still others oblivious, but the question hangs over all of us: What frames what? Does our way of thinking frame Nietzsche or does his way of thinking frame us? Linda Alcoff, a leading feminist of the past couple decades, is one of the people who has forced this issue on me, and if you want a great introduction to the issues, consult her essay on "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,"[14] in which she writes about the ways that feminism, specifically in the second half of the twentieth century, has been caught on the horns of a dilemma. Whereas first-wave feminists were able to argue on the basis of a shared humanity, Alcoff notes, by the latter half of the twentieth century, not only was the idea of a shared essential humanity no longer available to feminists, the idea of an essential definition of woman had also been lost. Alcoff understands that trying to insert Woman as a substitute for Man or for Humanity would only be one more way to try to get some surrogate for God (or Man) to do what God is no longer available to do; and yet, she points out, it is very difficult to speak up for women without some clear means of defining who it is you are speaking up for and why.

I bring up this conundrum not in order to solve it right now, and certainly not to speak critically of very important movements that are rooted in the body, but rather to point out that the Nietzschean framework that we are tempted to dismiss does, in fact, frame our culture far more than we might want to think it does–and that important issues of justice and mercy are at stake. When one observes how organizations and movements actually function, all too often ones sees a Nietzschean will to power that transforms everything into politics, not simply in the competition between groups but within groups as well. I will leave it with you to come to your own conclusions as to where the will to power proves to be the trump card, but I do encourage you to observe and reflect on the ways that causes are defined and groups identified, whether in the setting of the university or the church, whether in the National Organization of Women or the Republican Party. Again, my point is not to speak critically of any of these groups or others like them but to express a genuine concern about the extent to which the assertion of the will, often masked as something else, dominates discourse. Nietzsche is right, there is a will to power that is at work pretty commonly in human experience, and it is not easy to formulate theories of the

human that escape this Nietzschean insight in a world where everything has become possible but nothing is necessary.

In the time remaining, I would like to suggest, in my typically Pascalian manner, that we might find our best way forward in our discussion about being human by focusing on shared human experiences. Specifically, we would do well to focus on the shared experiences of human interaction. These include, for instance: the experience of the other, the ways that human actions create the human reality, our shared sense of moral responsibility, the experience of communicated meaning, etc. In order to do this, we do not need to start new conversations, we need only participate in the conversations that are already underway. Where that conversation focuses on human interaction, it may well prove fruitful whether it comes to us from existentialists or Marxists, from reflections on human sexuality or on communicated meaning, from psychoanalytic theory or communitarian theory. Theorists of any sort who draw our attention to human interaction are drawing our attention to the right place.

One of the post-Nietzschean thinkers who faced the challenge of making something of being human in a Nietzschean framework and who did so by focusing on what he called "inter-subjectivity" was the mid-twentieth-century existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre struggled most famously with this challenge in an essay entitled "Existentialism is a Humanism,"–but don't let the title fool you; Sartre understood his post-Nietzschean setting and knew that he was writing in a post-humanist culture. Sartre acknowledged that humanism in the past had always depended on the idea that "essence precedes existence." In a humanistic framework, human purpose or meaning comes first, and then humans fulfill that purpose or meaning. In its most basic form, this way of thinking goes hand-in-glove with theism. "When we think of God as creator," Sartre, writes, "we are thinking of him, most of the time, as a supernal artisan.... so that when God creates he knows precisely what he is creating. Thus, the conception of man in the mind of God is comparable to that of the paper-knife in the mind of the artisan.... Thus each individual man is the realization of a certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding." (27) Sartre also argued that this kind of thinking was no longer available in his day.

In lieu of humanism Sartre offers atheistic existentialism, which "believes that *existence* comes before *essence*–or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective." (26) While Sartre allows for a theistic version of existentialism, he also admits that "even if God existed that would make no difference from [existentialism's] point of view." (56) Sartre, himself, proceeds from what he views as the more consistent viewpoint of atheism. Let me quote him at length.

> "Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man, or as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world–and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then we will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills.... Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism." (28)

Sartre tells us that we can think of existentialism, then, as the view that existence precedes essence, not the other way round. Thus, there can no longer be any of the old humanism, whether of the theistic sort, based in the will of the Creator, or of the naturalistic sort, based in an appeal to what comes naturally.

As with Nietzsche before him and Foucault after him, Sartre was quite clear in refusing to look to the Enlightenment and its heirs to get from nature what only revealed religion can give. Sartre makes this case most forcefully by borrowing the term "abandonment" from Heidegger, by which he means "that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end. The existentialist," Sartre continues, "is strongly opposed to a certain type of secular moralism which seeks to suppress God at the least possible expense." (33) Such thinkers view God "as a useless and costly hypothesis" that they would like to do without, but they still assert the same moral order that always depended on him. "In other words," they hold that "nothing will be changed if God does not exist." (33) Sartre refuses to give place to such thinking and writes that the existentialist "finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven.... Dostoievsky once wrote, 'If God did not exist, everything would be permitted': and that, for existentialism, is the starting point." (33)

As the title of the essay suggest, Sartre builds a case for viewing existentialism as a new-style humanism, and he does so by arguing first, that in a universe where God does not exist (or his existence doesn't matter), man is fully responsible for himself, and second, that each of us is responsible not only for ourselves but for all humanity. Finally, Sartre concludes, existentialism is a humanism not in the old sense that we all share a human nature or essence but in a new sense that is centered in the idea of a universality of condition that we all share–a condition in which

we are all responsible for creating human reality and making it what it is. Let me try to clarify this line of argument ever so briefly.

Step one: because there is no God, and because existence precedes essence, man is responsible for what he is. "The first effect of existentialism," Sartre writes, "is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders." (29) A universe without God does not deny human responsibility. To the contrary, it leaves responsibility in the only place it can reside. To those who argue that "'your values are not serious, since you choose them yourself.'" Sartre responds, "To that I can only say that I am very sorry that it should be so; but if I have excluded God the Father, there must be somebody to invent values. We have to take things as they are. And moreover, to say that we invent values means neither more nor less than this; that there is no sense in life *a priori*. Life is nothing until it is lived; but it is yours to make sense of and the value of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose. Therefore, you can see that there is a possibility of creating a human community." (54-56). There are possibilities for lots of things, of course, but the point here is that humans are responsible for what humans become.

Step two: when Sartre argues that the individual is responsible for himself, he also asserts that each of us is also responsible for all of humanity.

> "When we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.... For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be.... Our responsibility is thus, much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole." (29)

He concludes, "I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man." (30) One way that Sartre makes this argument is by asserting that Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" is the only starting point of philosophy. [At the bottom of the front side of your handout I give you Sartre's comment on the Cartesian starting point, but let me direct you to the third quotation on the back of your handout, where you will see that] Sartre builds on Descarte's foundation in a manner quite different from Descartes. Whereas Descartes moves from the certainty of the thinking self to the certainty of the immaterial soul and the certainty of God, Sartre moves from the certainty of the thinking self to the certainty of individual moral responsibility and the certainty of other selves through whom self-consciousness is mediated. Sartre makes it clear that the subjectivity that existentialism asserts is not some narrow individual subjectivity, for

> "it is not only one's own self that one discovers in the *cogito*, but those of others too.... When we say "I think" we are attaining to ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves. Thus the man who discovers himself directly in the *cogito* also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence.... I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself.... Thus, at once, we find ourselves in a world which is, let us say, that of 'inter-subjectivity.'" (45)

What we call self-consciousness, he notes, is always mediated by the presence of the other. From our very first self awareness as a child to our most profound adult reflections, our sense of self is always already mediated be the existence of the other. We are responsible, therefore, not only for ourselves, but also for all of humanity, for the totality of human reality is what it is because of the actions of individual humans. Or, to put it the other way round, individual humans are responsible for making human reality what it is.

Sartre concludes his essay by suggesting that in a post-humanist age, existentialism can still be understood as a humanism, then, not because of some shared human nature, inherent meaning, or essential purpose but because of a universality of condition. While it is impossible to speak of "a universal essence that can be called human nature," (45-46) he writes, "there is nevertheless a human universality of *condition*." (46) There is a condition of inter-subjectivity in which the absolutely free acts of individuals create the human reality, a process without end in which "man"–or the human reality is always still to be determined. In this process, Sartre argues, each individual is not only responsible but is also constantly losing himself, and thus transcending himself in the creation of humanity. On the one hand,

> "Man is all the time outside of himself; it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist. Since man is thus self-surpassing, and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and center of his transcendence. There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity. This relation of transcendence as constitutive of man (not in the sense that God is transcendent, but in the sense of self-surpassing) with subjectivity (in such a sense that man is not shut up in himself but forever present in a human universe)–it is this that we call existential humanism." (55)

It is in man's recognizing that he is the sole legislator and in always seeking beyond himself "that man can realize himself as truly human." (56)

Of all the readings that I assign in classes, this one always engages students as well as any, and I will be glad to hear your thoughts in our discussion in a few minutes. I will also be holding office hours every Wednesday from 12:30 to 2:00 and every Friday from 10:00 to 11:30. I would be delighted for this to be an ongoing conversation and would love to have you stop by and tell me what you think. Let me conclude with just a thought or two of my own.

It seems to me that there are two ways to read Sartre's comments about inter-subjectivity and human responsibility. One can read them, on the one hand, as an argument for responsibility based in philosophical necessity. One can read them, on the other hand, as a fascinating, thought-provoking reflection on human reality. As a philosophical argument, I do not find him persuasive. I find it frustrating that he wants to view Descartes' *cogito* as the absolute starting point of philosophy and that he then wants to argue that Descartes's necessary conclusions should be replaced by Sartre's necessary conclusions. Seems to me that Sartre is as vulnerable to doubt as Descartes turned out to be. I see no reason in Sartre's universe to view my personal choices as binding on myself, much less on others, nor do I see my choices as necessarily committing humanity to my conception of myself. I do not think it is difficult at all to view my inclination to value aesthetics more highly than other humans might as merely an idiosyncratic preference that is not binding on anyone. Nor does my choice to marry commit humanity to marriage as a good for all. It simply doesn't–not in Sartre's world, and his attempt to work the old Kantian dictum of doing only that which you can imagine everyone doing sounds hollow when Nietzsche hits it with his hammer. I am free to choose my own way, and I am free to try to get others to follow my ways if I choose to, but there is no philosophical necessity involved–not for myself or for others. In Sartre's Nietzschean world, "it ain't necessarily so."

When, however, one accepts Sartre's essay not as an argument based in philosophical necessity but simply as thoughtful and provocative observations about aspects of human experience and reality that are worth reflecting over, his thoughts strike me as having a lot to offer. Sartre is right: We humans do make human reality what it is. Individual actions create not only our own lives but the lives of others. The myth of modern individualism notwithstanding, each of us constantly creates humanity. Our friendships and marriages do not sit out there in the social universe as objects on which we each merely have our own perspectives, these relationships are the combined experience that we each have in those relationships, and they are what they are because of what each of us makes them. Sartre is right again in arguing that we do begin with self consciousness, and he is right again to point out that our self-consciousness is always mediated. We become conscious of ourselves as children, sons and daughters, as brothers and sisters, and for the most part this happens to us before we are conscious of the fact that it has

happened. We are constantly mediated through each other, and we are inextricably linked into each other's lives. Sartre is, therefore, justified in speaking about our inter-subjectivity in terms of self-transcendence. In our individual actions we do transcend our individual selves, and I am inclined to let Sartre describe this as a universality of condition.

The question, however, that Sartre's thought-provoking essay leaves me with in the end is: Are his observations and insights into human reality enough? Having drawn our attention to these realities, the question then becomes: Do Sartre's reflections on the existential reality of human responsibility and inter-subjectivity give us a satisfying way of understanding the human condition or do they leave us looking for a more satisfying, larger framework? When other thoughtful intellectuals focus on social construction, on the encounter with the other, or on the experience of communicated meaning, do their reflections give us the answers we have been looking for as to how to understand the human or do they only clarify our questions about what it means to be human? The realities of human interaction are striking, provocative, and often very moving, but do they give us a way of understanding ourselves as human? Sartre does a remarkable and thought-provoking job of focusing our attention on the human reality and deepening our own thought, but in the end, he may do more to clarify the question than he does to give us a satisfying way of understanding our humanness.[15]

Sartre himself recognizes this kind of challenge in what are perhaps his most famous lines of this most famous essay. Well into the essay he writes, "Tomorrow, after my death, some men may decide to establish Fascism, and the others may be so cowardly or so slack as to let them do so. If so, Fascism will then be the truth of man, and so much the worse for us." (40) Richard Rorty quotes this line in the introduction to his *Consequences of Pragmatism* and deals with it with his usual honesty and consistency–the same kind of honesty and consistency we find in Sartre. Rorty admits that "seeing all criteria as no more than temporary resting places... seems *morally humiliating.*" It means "that when the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form 'There is something within you which you are betraying.... There is something beyond [your totalitarian] practices which condemns you.'" (xlii) That sort of appeal, Rorty argues, is not available. "This thought is hard to live with," Rorty admits but it reflects the fact that "there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves." (xlii)

Sartre admits that if people choose fascism, then fascism is the truth of man. But he cannot help himself, so he also says, "and so much the worse for us." What shall we make of the fact that Sartre is unable not to make a judgement about fascism but also unable to account for that

judgment or justify it. Has Sartre perhaps put us in touch with a depth of reality which transcends the understanding of the human in which he tries to frame it? We want very much to be able to say with him, “So much the worse for us,” but what could we possibly mean by that if “the truth of man” is simply whatever reality we have, in fact, created? It does seem to me that the better way to make sense of the realities to which Sartre has directed our attention is to look for a framework that is larger than what Sartre can give us.

Not long ago I came across a single line by Vaclav Havel in a comment on Emmanuel Levinas’ book *Humanism and the Other*. Like Sartre, Havel starts with the existential reality of human “responsibility for the world.” Unlike Sartre, however, Havel remains open to the place for a larger framework for understanding this reality. Havel notes that when Levinas “taught that the sense of responsibility for the world is born in us with a look into the face of a fellow-being,” Levinas was “guided by the spirit of the oldest European traditions, apparently most of all by the Jewish traditions.”[16] In making this comment Havel provides a good example. First, he enters and extends the conversation that focuses on human experience and how to understand it. Second, he agrees with Levinas that it is the experiences of inter-subjectivity or the interaction of humans with humans that is worth puzzling over. Third, he does not so much see an answer in these interactions as he sees a question that seeks a larger framework of understanding. Fourth, when Havel looks for the larger ideas that are adequate for understanding these striking human realities, he finds those ideas in Levinas’ Jewish tradition.

It is worth noting that in rooting Levinas’ thought in ancient Jewish tradition Havel brings us full circle to where Descartes and his Enlightenment heirs began. The *philosophes* of the eighteenth century largely formed their humanist project from the theological framework that they had inherited from Jewish and Christian theology. When they abandoned the theology of those traditions, however, their project came unglued and eventually fell prey to the penetrating criticism of Nietzsche and his heirs. Perhaps the theological framework is more important than is often realized. Perhaps it does more work than it often gets credit for. Perhaps we need to let Vaclav Havel take us back to where Enlightenment humanism took a wrong turn so that we can reconsider the possibility that the Jewish and Christian traditions, which root our humanity in the image of God, continue to offer a compelling way to understand our humanity. Sartre is right to focus our attention on human inter-subjectivity and to deepen and enrich our reflection on such reality. Havel is right to acknowledge the theological traditions and to suggest that they may still offer us more compelling and richer ways of framing these realities than Sartre himself can give us.

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Christian Study Center of Gainesville

End Notes

1.René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (Penguin, 1968) p. 18.

2.Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sufferings of Young Werther* (Frederick Ungar, 1957) p. 63, 97.

3.Descartes, p. 19.

4.William Blake, “The Voice of the Devil” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (line 11).

5.Blake, “Proverbs of Hell,” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (line 64).

6.David Deane, *Nietzsche and Theology* (Ashgate Publishing, 2006), p.53.

7.Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, Translated by George Eliot (Prometheus Books, 1989), p. 3.

8.Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 47-48.

9.Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (MIT Press, 1987), p. 85.

10.Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, Translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Penguin, 1968), p. 65.

11.Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers*, *Volume III* (Cambridge UP, 1998) p. 54.

12.Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Vintage Books, 1973), p. 383.

13.Foucault, p. 342.

14.Linda Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory” in Linda Nicholson, edtitor, *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (Routledge, 1997), pp. 330-355.

15.Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism and Humanism.”

16.Vaclav Havel, back cover of Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism and the Other* (University of Illinois Press, 2005).