

EXISTENTIALISM AND ABSURDISM



RECALL: SOME RESPONSES TO HEGEL

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)- Hegel ignores the limitations on human understanding. (Existentialism)

Karl Marx (1818-1883)- Hegel ignores the material reality of human existence. (Marxism)

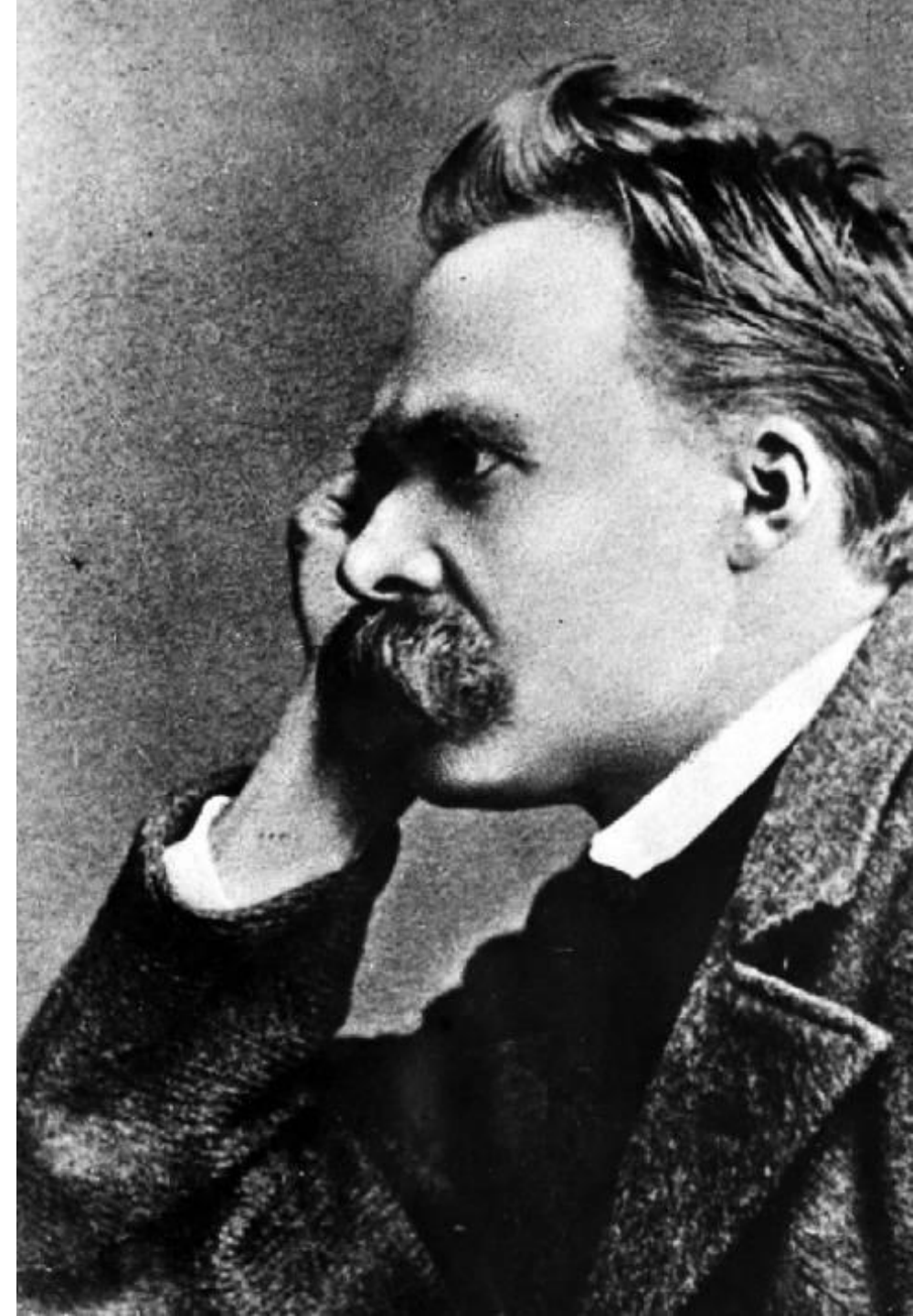
SØREN KIERKEGAARD (1813-1855)

- Key Idea: *leap of faith*
- We must go beyond what we can establish or even what we ourselves rationally believe to create a basis for thought itself.



FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE (1844-1900)

- “God is dead”
- This means humans have “outgrown” the need for God and have therefore done away with this hypothesis-- it is humans who have “killed” God. (GS 125.)



TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS (1889)

Socrates was weak and overly rational, because he couldn't get true power through the correct kind of means (great speeches, heroic deeds, etc.), so he turned to philosophy.

Plato, and what came to be a religion of Platonism-- i.e. Christianity, promise that some other place where nothing changes is the true world and that the "apparent world" (the world of the senses) is not the "true world."

Nietzsche thinks that this is a sign of how messed up traditional morality and especially Christianity is-- it is a denial of our true selves.

Therefore, traditional morality and especially Christianity should be abandoned.



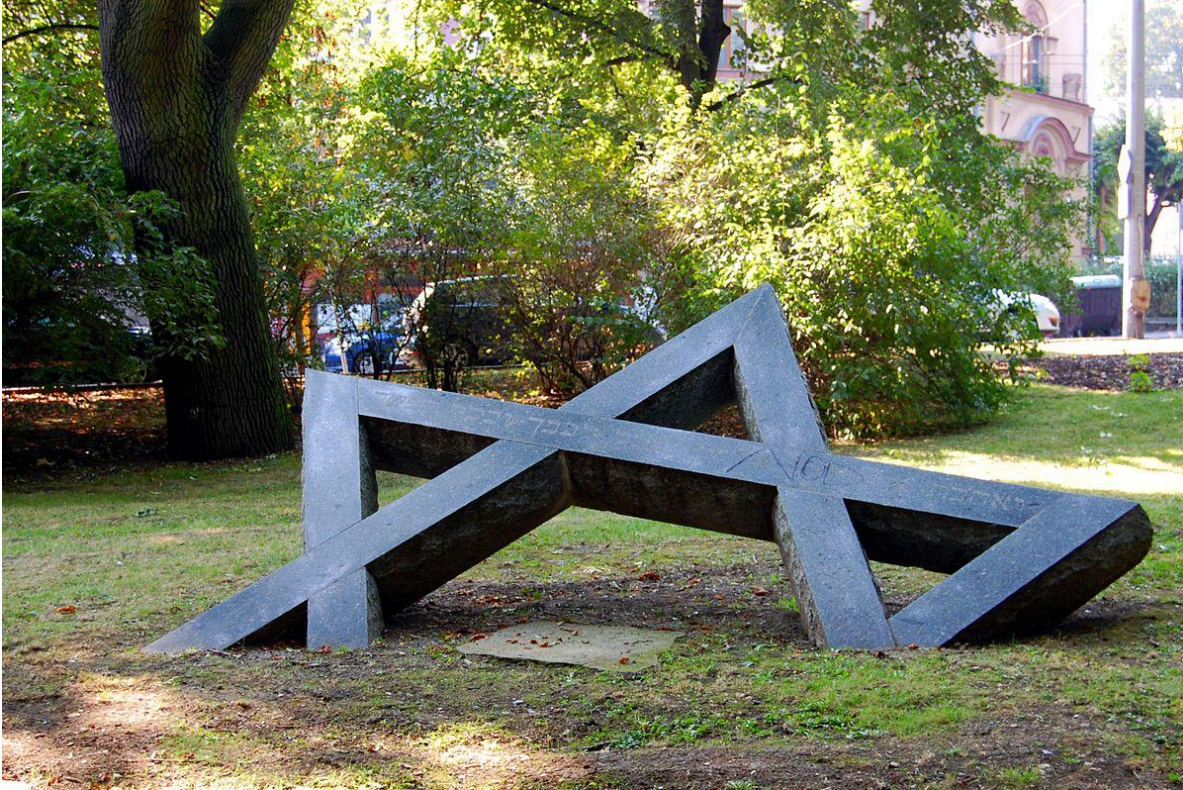
BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

Does this mean, once traditional morality is abandoned, that there are no values, etc.; that everything is permissible, etc.? Only sort of. Nietzsche thinks that, now that we have discarded the old useless idols which were holding us back, we can march into a future of truly *human* values-- connected to our greatness, our passions, etc. So Nietzsche would in no way admire a glutton or person who drinks too much, etc.-- they are failing to be a “great” human.

SO HOW DID THINGS TURN OUT FOR THE NEW “MASTERS OF THEIR OWN DESTINY”?

If God is dead and the Platonic world of the Forms is an empty illusion, then what is the meaning of our lives? Nietzsche proclaimed a glorious future for humanity in which the empty values of traditional morality are replaced with human values of a “beautiful” and heroic life ...

THINGS DIDN'T TURN OUT SO WELL FOR HUMANS



The Holocaust (1941-1945)- Over 2/3rds of Jews in Europe are systematically and “scientifically” murdered by the Nazis.



Hiroshima (August 6, 1945)- 70,000 human beings are instantly “wiped out” in a flash from a single atomic bomb dropped by the United States. Humanity enters the “nuclear age” in which it has the power to destroy itself in a matter of hours.

NOW WHAT?

So, there are no eternal values or meaning, and there is no ultimate purpose. What now?

The French existentialists of the mid-20th century answer this question by analyzing the situation that we are in-- whether there is ultimate meaning or not, we are here.

JOHN PAUL SARTRE (1905-1980)

- “Existence precedes essence”
- “Humanity is condemned to be free”



EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE

This means that humans don't start off with some essential nature that we either live up to or fail to live up to. We just kind of show up. We *exist first*, we *find* that we are existing, and then we must define what existence is for us only after this fact.

HUMANS ARE “CONDEMNED TO BE FREE”

- What does this mean? It means that human freedom is total (“[humanity] *is* freedom”)-- not that I can decide to, say fly, but that I have absolute freedom-- *all of the burden of choosing is on me*.
- I decide not to choose what to do or what to believe, etc.-- but this is still a choice. The only thing I don't have a choice about is that I *must choose*.
- When I do choose, *I make a declaration*.
- If I lie, therefore, it isn't as if I don't “measure up” to some eternal standard. There is no such standard.
- Instead, by lying I'm saying the following things: “I'm a liar,” and I'm also declaring: “Humans are liars.”
- It is in this *freedom* that my life has meaning-- it is the meaning I give it, and I *cannot escape* doing so.

ALBERT CAMUS (1913-1960)

Sartre says that we can “create meaning,” but Camus emphasizes how this is ultimately pointless.



THE *MYTH OF SISYPHUS*

- Camus describes the following absurd situation: There is no ultimate meaning, but humans constantly look for meaning.
- Camus compares this to the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus, who is punished by Zeus (Sisyphus temporarily prevented mortals from dying, angering Zeus!) to push a bolder up a hill, eternally.
- “One must imagine Sisyphus happy”



THE PLAGUE (1947)

- *The Plague* is a novel about the plague coming to besiege the Algerian town of Oran, and how the inhabitants of the town deal with the situation.
- What is the “plague” supposed to represent? Well, at a very surface level, it could represent Nazism/Fascism, etc. But digging deeper, it looks like the plague represents the human condition itself– the condition of absurdity (i.e. humans constantly look for meaning in an indifferent universe).
- How does one deal with this situation?