

Existentialism and Organisations

(4614 Words)

Existentialism has been evolving as a philosophy since the mid 1800's, developing organically across Europe from Kierkegaard in Denmark, through Heidegger in Germany and was formalised into a revolutionary way of thinking by Jean-Paul Sartre against a backdrop of the resistance movement's counter offensives against Germany in occupied France at the time of WWII. The philosophy itself had been viewed negatively by the Catholic Church having been developed as work undertaken from an atheist perspective and yet Soren Kierkegaard, arguably the father of Existentialism, was a devout believer as are others subscribing even to Sartre's radical iteration of the doctrine. Existentialism had not, as many may believe, disappeared after the death of Jean-Paul Sartre in 1980 but rather it had informed the views, writing, performance and artistic endeavours of many. Having said this, in terms of theoretical development it has remained largely dormant without the intellectual force of Sartre driving and upholding its position and without a good, accessible book on the subject, the E-word does seem like something of a Marmite Monster; you either love and nurture it as a pet or run away from it quickly when it appears on the horizon! However, a quick search of the internet press and message boards reveals a vibrant and keen interest among all ages of people from different countries in both Sartre and Existentialism.

While Sartre tried to set out Existentialism's position in relation to other philosophical theories of economic, social and political slant including Marxism, Humanism and religion; the world was busily disseminating the cultural changes that his philosophy arguably initiated. This made him a cult figure and a source of intellectual wisdom on current affairs, someone from whom the public sought comfort in wisdom in the shadow of dramatic events. His philosophy certainly became something of a movement with advocates commonly wearing black, enjoying the bohemian café society and smoking across coffee tables of debate whereas those considering themselves part of an upper class were often found to be berating existentialists by associating them with perceived negative things such as laziness and often far worse. The affect of the movement on Western society may have included influence upon music in the 60's and 70's, the literature of Milan Kundera, arguably Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka and also Fyodor Dostoyevsky who wrote, on occasion, of characters in his novels suffering an existential crisis. There is even a wonderful new children's book to be published in March called the 'Existential Giraffe' which has been funded entirely via a crowd sourcing website. Many claims for existential art have been made including the belief of some that the recent record breaking £74 million sale of Edvard Munch's oil painting 'The Scream' possibly depicts the anxiety (or angst) of the human condition caused by one's radical realisation that one is trapped within life, condemned to be free. This awful feeling can occur for us as a very real experience perhaps at those times when we face the loss of a loved one, or difficulties at work which may lead to our being thrown into a kind of existential crucible. The crux of which is having been forced by the situation to call into question our own beliefs on who we are, how life works and what happens after it all ends, if anything at all. For example, the sedimentary layers of the way we think, act and feel somehow copied or learned as behaviour from the sadly departed during their lifetime begin to fall away from us particularly with a man's loss of his father. However, if we manage to make it through this wilderness, we are forced to derive our own new meaning where once perhaps our parents or guardians derived our purpose through their teaching, nurturing and also, in the case of natural parents, by the very reasons we were conceived. So can we truly give ourselves over completely to a belief until we have first lost those that we have been told to listen to and believe by others?

I have met a number of people who have discussed with me that one or other parent wanted them to be work in a certain profession and while some ended up in the role their parents intended, others chose their own path or by circumstance had a path forced upon them. Sartre suggested that we are thrown into this world with no pre-ordained purpose (our existence precedes our essence) and it is for us to derive a purpose, an essence and to create meaning in our own lives for ourselves through our free choices and actions. Perhaps a good way to just begin to understand this idea might be to consider the difference between whether we think before we act or act before we think and how the influence of others affects these options. I seem to recall being told once or twice in my youth to "*Think before you speak!*" or to "*Stop thinking and get on with it!*" although the latter may have been ever so slightly more recently. Have you ever used the 'count to ten' or 'bite your tongue' techniques before you say something in anger that you may later regret? We can choose to be who we want to be, choose our values, choose our profession and choose what we believe in and this becomes who we are by what we say and what we do. The phrases, "*Be true to oneself*" and "*Just be yourself*" are often used these days, but where did phrases like this come from? Well, maybe not from Existentialism but there is something in these phrases and how they are spoken about personal authenticity and the possible benefits that acting upon them may have to wellbeing, happiness and success. So who are we anyway?

One way in which we can possibly learn a bit more about ourselves is with the often discussed notion of personality type but, in addition to this, we can consider that people also possess one of four core philosophical tendencies being idealism, pragmatism, realism (rationalism) and existentialism. While these are of a somewhat deeper, more values based nature than personality, they can be just as important a way of living and understanding ourselves and each other. Of these, both Idealism and Existentialism have had their difficult moments and for those who are naturally of a tendency towards one or the other of these, difficult times may have been faced in the past. This may have even manifested as direct accusations of being, in the former case, a perfectionist and a dreamer or in the latter case over-analysing or being lazy. Isn't this really just being quality focussed and visionary or, in the latter case, cautious and considered. It is not the philosophical tendency that is a risk or a threat to, for example, control within an institution but rather the risk of a tendency becoming extremism. We need those idealistic dreamers of our future and the existential thinkers that unlock different ways of thinking that may create wealth and health, generating revolutions not only in thought but in society and technology.

Without the Richard Branson's and Steve Jobs of this world our lives might be somewhat less comfortable and less entertaining at least! Pragmatism and realism (rationalism) seem to have been, as yet, free from major public criticism and are well supported by our building of a secular society and our relentless scientific and empirical endeavour. So with these four basic philosophical tendencies at hand, you may have just discovered for the first time that you have an existential philosophical outlook on life and that it *is* quite normal. While none of these models of personality or philosophical tendency need to be considered in any way as concrete, they can offer some insight into the way we operate as individuals and also collectively as groups or as organisations of people. Over the last decade or so, there has been a substantial increase in academic papers published relating Existential philosophy to the running of organisations from which we may infer at least a minor resurgence of the doctrine which is worthy of a little evening consideration, perhaps over a glass of Cabernet or two. Since people of all these philosophical tendencies are out there working in, formulating and leading organisations of all types and given our current economic climate of austerity, could there perhaps be something that we can learn about how organisations function from the philosophy of Existentialism?

Innovation

Innovation is not just about inventions although for innovation to be successful, inventions are certainly required. It was in the spaces of life, the gaps between actions that Sartre thought we take those decisions and choices that make us free. One of the most important factors in inventing new ways of doing things is having free time to try new methods of working, whether it's down in the garden shed with mechanical contraptions, in the kitchen with new ingredients or working in research and development for a multinational organisation. The really new ideas and inventions seem to arrive as a result of having the freedom to spend time failing which the constraints and time pressures of the modern working climate do not often facilitate. The classic and oft quoted example of learning to fail is the invention of the light bulb by Thomas Edison whose 10,000 or more attempts not only yielded an epoch making innovation by tenacity but also perhaps through perceived necessity or just sheer desperation. Asked by a journalist if Edison thought he might now be a failure, he replied, *"I have not failed 10,000 times. I have not failed once. I have succeeded in proving that those 10,000 ways will not work. When I have eliminated the ways that will not work, I will find the way that will work."* Arguably, the most famous internet company in the world, Google, are famed for their approach to such things having 20% of their staff's time dedicated to innovation with employees able to work on their own inventive projects which may become products of the company if they show promise. They are not alone, with 3M, the global manufacturer of all manner of different products including the 'post-it note' allowing some 15% of working hours for innovation rather than in the pursuit of prescribed tasks passed down the organisational control hierarchy. So how does all this relate to a French philosophy that is as difficult to clarify as an oil-covered rear windscreen?

Well, it does seem as though there is a certain kind of free thinking entrepreneurial spirit that is required to continually seek out new opportunities for invention. Yet, at the same time as freedom of thought is important in discovering that which is new, the flip side of this paradox is that entrepreneurialism is often seeded in a strong sense of personal responsibility. After all, the dutifully powerful drive that must have fuelled Edison's crusade towards holding over 1000 patents by the end of his career may not have occurred without the belief that he was creating something for the good of all humanity. Existentialism is founded in the concept of our relation to the world of objects, the subject versus object region of thought. If one is to create something from nothing, the conversion of an idea into a tangible innovation, a fiction into a fact then this boundary of subjective and objective must be crossed. An understanding of the difference between the function and the aesthetics of objects is required along with the customary understanding of the benefits that these produce. If we consider the joys of using a certain pad style computer, apart from the myriad uses of such a device, there is also a certain elegance about the physical design which no doubt many industrial designers laboured night and day to achieve. Although not directly relating to innovation but rather decision making in the face of an ethical conundrum Sartre

said, “*You are free, choose, that is, invent.*” and among other reasons, the basic common essence of a thing may be that it is designed for beauty with an idealistic intent or for function with a labour saving intent; a benefit to our general existence. Both of these are appealing to Existentialism with its freedom of thought and the capacity to save time which can then be used for other activities (such as thought in itself). It could be that an Existentialist philosophical tendency is optimum for innovation but can an existential ethic be practically applied in organisations?

Ethics and Decision Making

An authentic decision is one which is made in the face of death or at least at great personal risk and recent research seems to support this suggesting that we make better decisions when we are angry, or perhaps when we are experiencing a fight or flight response. Some attempts have been made to create an Existential ethic with which to make decisions and in developing a Sartrean ethic for organisational decision making, Andrew West has reminded us of Michael Josephson’s simple decision making process called the Bell, Book and Candle approach. In this approach we may listen for the internal emotional warning *bell* that something doesn’t sound right then we can check the *book* to see if there are any laws, rules or restrictions inhibiting our decision. Finally we hold the *candle* to the decision to determine whether, in the cold light of day, the decision would be acceptable to others. This is a great approach to ethical decision making and one which we can all easily remember and recall when making one of those ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ decisions. West’s excellent proposal for an Existential ethic is developed somewhat further than the Bell, Book and Candle approach and seems to be quite potent and useful in everyday life. The ethic follows these simple steps:

- 1) *Acknowledge and Identify my Freedom to Act*
- 2) *Accept my responsibility*
- 3) *Consider my prior choices, projects and goals*
- 4) *Consider the pressures and expectations of others*
- 5) *Consider the practical constraints of the situation*
- 6) *Proceed with the choice that best reflects my awareness of freedom, my acceptance of personal responsibility and is most consistent with the goals and projects that I freely choose.*

In the academic discourse on this subject, Agarwal and Malloy have developed a great example of a far more complicated existential ethical decision making process which does offer a great way of considering very serious decisions that could be of an organisational, national or international level affecting a great many people. This more complex process benefits from considering the individual decision maker, their family, the organisation and also the outer world along with due care given to the specific considerations of the actual problem at hand. It is said to lead to a right, good and authentic decision which remains accountable to humanity and yet still true to oneself as decision maker. Sometimes the big decisions we make in life can weigh heavily on the conscience and these, along with the changing circumstances of our lives and other personal responsibilities, can risk burdening us to a point of being unable to function. Given that Existentialism was conceived against the backdrop of difficult times and life or death decisions, how might it help with our modern crucibles?

Existential Coaching

It’s tough at the top and that doesn’t just mean those at the head of an organisation but given the recent discussions in the press about housewives (or househusbands) actually being ‘Family CEOs’ (Chief Executive Officers) due the complexities of modern life, we can perhaps see how it’s easily possible in modern life to be in a position of big responsibility, little power and far from perfect support infrastructure. In any position such as this, it can often seem that there is ‘no exit’ because although we may feel like we are not coping sometimes, there is no way we can easily relieve the pressures bearing down upon us for anything other than a short time particularly when these pressures seemingly approach us from all directions. Those leaders who make it to the role of Chief Executive for an organisation have often been devoting their lives solely to their worklife in order to attain such a position of responsibility. They may well have young families and possibly one or more parents sadly nearing the end of their lives with all of the difficult decisions, pressures and grief that such a normal life event can bring. Existential coaching is thought by some to be a way in which someone in such a position might be assisted to progress from a place where the previous meaning in life and the way things were can move on to a place of finding new meaning in their life in keeping with the major changes that are occurring or have already occurred. Viktor Frankl wrote a number of volumes of his work known as Logotherapy, an existential method of developing meaning. During his time in a concentration camp, he developed the beginnings of his work which, in its most simple form, essentially comprises of imagining how one’s future happy self coped with the present difficulties. It is essential, to organisations, that people in important positions are able to continue their tenure even when times in their personal lives are difficult but it is human, all too human for all people to struggle sometimes. An organisation, as many do, can do nothing better and should do

nothing more than supporting such senior executives and indeed, if possible, all employees with compassion, guidance and access to help for when difficult times do strike as they inevitably will. While existential coaching may not always be the correct kind of assistance for a particular person, it is one of the ways in which the philosophy which also became a psychology and a method of coaching can be applied to organisations. A world renowned clinical professor of leadership development, Manfred F.R. Kets De Vries, has certainly helped many organisational leaders to work through issues such as these utilising existential coaching techniques to enable leaders to find new meaning and continue to operate in their vocation to their fullest capacity. While it holds that one must take personal responsibility for all of humanity, Existentialism also remains a deeply personal and individualistic philosophy so how might it affect our communication as individuals with other people in the organisation for which we work?

Communication

Communication is obviously crucial to day to day life in organisations and there are far too many clichés to quote regarding its importance to us in operating effectively. All those little things that we build up in our minds about who our colleagues are and what we perceive our position to be in terms of power and authority can actually become barriers to succeeding as a collective organisation. So often, instead of organisational changes occurring by means of freely discussed and actively planned projects, the company's actual transition from one state of being to another proceeds, as has been discussed by J. Kelly, by force and through conflict (hopefully just verbal) perhaps motivated by Nietzsche's 'will to power'. However, the removal of such barriers possibly caused by our desire for power or maybe developed as a result of the inhibiting of our freedom to determine our own day to day tasks in the workplace, might cause our communications with our colleagues to be far more effective. Karl Jaspers talked about something more than this, perhaps seeing Existentialism as a stage of personal spiritual development leading next to something he called Existenz; a kind of Zen like transcendence of the self. Salamun has gone on to suggest that something called Existential communication can lead to a higher state of consciousness defining this experience of communication in the following way:

1. *The subject of, or participant in, communication is not treated as a means to the individual's own existential ends. The intention is not solely self realization, but to help the partner to realise his or her own Existenz.*
2. *An open mind is essential, along with a candour that may well leave the individual feeling vulnerable, but will reveal the possibility to change taken for granted modus operandi.*
3. *There must be a willingness to accept the communication partner as an equal, regardless of their status.*
4. *There exists an intellectual integrity and honesty that enables the individual to recognize and criticize one's own failings with the same force as one does others.*
5. *Last, there must be a readiness and ability to withstand the solitude that may be the consequence of the self-realization of existential communication and, therefore, not to seek to avoid loneliness at any price.*

Whether or not this form of communication has anything to do with leadership is uncertain but in any case it has been noted that the descriptions seem to contrast with those of the stereotypical 'strong leader' figure by offering a far more sensitive, emotionally intelligent and perhaps even apparently fragile persona. This idea almost evokes the possibility of a rather humble 'will to serve' and I don't mean Andy Murray's Wimbledon motivation but rather the thing which must ideally motivate millions of public servants to go to work each day or at least the thing which may have once motivated them. This persona of service is perhaps more akin to a figure such as the Dali Lama than Napoleon or Churchill. The Sartrean centre ground between power and service might perhaps be an authentic 'will to willing', a kind of resolute determination and commitment to whatever is the freely chosen and truly believed right, good and authentic cause. Maybe this is a case of doing something purely for its own sake. Something of the flavour of this 'will to willing' can perhaps be seen in Winston Churchill's speeches and as a musician of nothing more than mere hobbyist status, even I can tell the difference between those occasions when I play my guitar and sing when I am not in the mood versus those moments when I play with commitment and determination to make myself heard as if it may be contributing to a greater but undefined significance. Perhaps Existential authenticity is the closest genuine description of the mystical 'X-Factor' that the popular television show is constantly seeking among performers rather than when they are 'just going through the motions'. Maybe you could try this intense commitment to an action with whatever it is that you do in life and you might find that you agree but meanwhile, what do these possible connections

to business and organisation mean and does Existentialism have any kind of future as it emerges from its very own paradoxical crisis without the father of its last century?

The purpose of a decision for the means to produce an end

Often in nature, the cure is to be found near the poison, as my mother taught me by finding Dock leaves for my legs after short-trousered encounters with stinging nettles and, whether it's a placebo or not, it always seems to work. We could consider that Existentialism, at least at the time of WWII, may well have assisted in the rebellion against German occupation leading to a vitalising of the resistance movement. If we abstract our thoughts away from the planet and view it as an astronaut might, albeit rather conceptually, the rise of this philosophy which is now a kind of sleeping dragon may have been an inevitable response of mother-nature to serious and global threat. It seems that there are more than just a few people currently writing about something called Post-Modern Existentialism (or Post Existentialism) and in our current time of global terrorism or perhaps some other yet to be unidentified threat one wonders if this may be another similar response of humanity to crisis. While there is perhaps no single person, as yet, with the capacity and desire to develop thought individually on this subject in quite the same prolific and public way that Sartre did, Existentialism, it seems, is back and this time it has computers, mobile phones and the internet to help it communicate with the vigour and passion of ten thousand globally informed Jean-Pauls.

Apart from the issues discussed, other subject areas within business and organisation have been analysed within academic works in relation to Existentialism. These include, Authentic Leadership, Leadership Consciousness, Organisational Identity (inc. brand) and also problems of company-wide existential crisis notably during a failed takeover of Fokker by Deutsche Aerospace at the end of the last century. The concept of Business Spirituality, an often misunderstood term formulated by Karen Velasco also commences from the premise that organisations can suffer from existential angst since at least a large part of what an organisation is, in essence, remains to be about and defined by people. This concept focuses on measuring then improving meaning at work at an employee level by asking us to consider what it is that our authentic selves seek from our working lives and how we might begin to build on this towards that sense of spiritual oneness or flow which leads to a very full sense of purpose in our working life. There is also, at least, a passing similarity or perhaps an opposition between Existentialism and Lean Thinking from the Toyota Production System with its reductionist analytical methodology stemming from Asian philosophies which Sartre also embraced in his research. It is in the gaps between consecutive actions where Lean finds waste and in eradicating the craft of the worker, perhaps temporarily creating Marxist Alienation but then allowing the opportunity for the development of wisdom in the Aristotelian sense with a matching of skill to knowledge. Here, in these gaps and pauses between actions, Sartre finds authenticity through the opportunity to freely choose for ourselves our actions and our purpose in life thus facilitating the creation of meaning to our existence. One way of thinking about this is that spiritual flow in our lives and working lives, just as much as in material flow within a factory, is created by a matching of supply with demand or perhaps we should say fulfilment with needs.

Good old Existentialism seems to offer a brand new perspective from which to research and understand how organisations operate and it may also assist us personally in finding meaning at times of great emotional need when our sense of identity is challenged. Having an existential philosophical tendency is quite normal and though we probably exhibit a tendency towards different philosophies depending on the situation, a certain percentage of people do have a preference towards existential philosophical tendency though they may not necessarily be subscribers to Existential philosophy. There may not be much evidence that people sitting around wearing black and smoking over endless coffees will invent something great or be more effective leaders, if indeed we want such a thing as leadership at all, but this way of thinking is somehow different to other philosophical tendencies, perhaps presenting an opportunity to create something original and freely chosen by the questioning and challenging of our own sedimentary layers of belief about all manner of things. In this way we can uncover a new found sense of personal authenticity in our self or in some thing. If we choose a particular religion, faith, vocation or decision because we have first questioned our thinking to the point of unbelief, that is to say, to the very nature or core of what we have previously been taught by excavating the layers of bad faith that we have unquestioningly accepted from others, haven't we then and only then, authentically chosen that belief and course of action freely?